Protecting the Peel: Environmental conservation in the age of First Nations self-government,

An examination of conservation in Yukon's Peel Watershed

Colin O'Neil

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ABSTRACT

Since the nineteenth century, conservation initiatives have been imposed on Indigenous populations across Canada, regulated traditional activities, and forcibly removed local peoples from long-occupied lands. In the twenty-first century, this seems to be changing. Recent scholarship envisions environmental conservation working with Indigenous peoples and some view this new conservation model as a path to reconciliation; yet in Canada, few examples can be identified. This thesis critically examines the engagement of environmental conservation with First Nations through an exploration of the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement in Yukon Territory's Peel Watershed. In it, I argue that the ways that environmental conservation engaged with First Nations throughout the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement provides insight for conservation across Canada, as it attempts to transcend its historically contentious relationship with Indigenous peoples, initiate a more collaborative conservation model, and help shape a path towards reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

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Introduction

Environmental conservation has not been kind to Indigenous peoples in Canada.[1] Protected areas across the country, and world-wide, are comprised of the traditional territories of Indigenous peoples, many of whom have been "coercively dispossessed and displaced, often without compensation" (Stevens, 2014, p. 3).[2] Characterized by the protection and management of species and natural resources, the creation and implementation of environmental policy, and the establishment of parks and protected areas, conservation has been utilized as a means to promote the health of the human population, protect diverse and vital species and ecosystems, and impose restrictions on the advancement of industrial capitalism. But as scholars note, conservation has also been used by both state and non-state actors to exert power over local populations and promote the goals and well-being of some while marginalizing and dispossessing others (Loo, 2001; Sandlos, 2003; Binnema & Niemi, 2006; Neufeld, 2011).

[1] In this thesis I use the broad term 'conservation' to refer to efforts to protect and manage wildlife, habitats, ecosystems, and landscapes, and promote environmental policy and regulations on industrial development. In some environmental literature (Oeschlaeger, 1991; Evernden, 1999), environmental 'conservation' is differentiated from environmental 'preservation', conservation being promoted for future human use, and preservation being promoted for the sake of the environment and non-human world itself, regardless of societal need. In large part, I choose conservation because this is what is used in Yukon Territory and by interview participants.

[2] As Monchalin (2016) notes, 'Indigenous' is a problematic term for the ways that it constructs distinct peoples with distinct languages, cultures, and traditions into a single entity. But Indigenous has become an accepted term used to speak about the commonalities between these many distinct nations, cultures, and peoples. Canada's three Indigenous populations – First Nations, Metis, and Inuit – are classified in the Canadian constitution of 1982 as three distinct groups, falling under the umbrella term 'Aboriginal' (Ibid). I will use the term Indigenous to speak about Aboriginal peoples across Canada as well as 'Indigenous peoples' globally.

Historically, environmental conservation has constructed 'the environment' as a scientific object while erasing the embedded ontologies of local peoples. As critical scholarship argues, conservation evolved within the framework of 'high-modernism' and the confidence in a linear, techno-scientific, and rational planning model that constructed 'nature' as external, to be controlled, protected, and managed (Cronon, 1996; Scott, 1998; Braun, 2002; Neufeld, 2011). The treatment of 'nature', or 'the environment', as separate from human beings and their 'culture', characterized by the nature-culture dichotomy, has been historicized, challenged, and deconstructed by critical scholars since the 1990s (Latour, 1993; Cronon, 1996; Castree & Braun, 2001; Braun, 2002). Environmentalism and conservation movements have often fallen into, and relied upon, the nature-culture dichotomy by constructing nature as an external space requiring a human hand to minimize the human footprint. Braun (2002) calls this dualistic environmentalism a romantic environmentalism "fraught with problems", for it does not acknowledge the ways that "environmental issues are intertwined with questions of race, class, gender, and sexuality" (p. 88).

Like 'nature' and environmental conservation, the concept of wilderness has been challenged by those who argue that all nature is social. Since the 1990s, academic scholarship has pointed to the ways that social constructions of wilderness rely upon the nature-culture duality to imagine 'wilderness' as a primeval, pristine, and unoccupied space outside of the culture of human society (Callicott, 1991; Cronon, 1996; Lippai, 2014). The deconstruction of the concept of wilderness has been inspired by Indigenous peoples themselves, for whom 'wilderness' became one of the many tools used by the settler state to regulate their lives and traditional practices and remove them from lands they had used and occupied for millennia (Spence, 1999; Cruikshank, 2005; Neufeld, 2011). By constructing wilderness as a place that existed apart from those used and occupied by human beings, the concept of wilderness ignored and erased the complex ways that Indigenous peoples had used and transformed the landscape, and in many cases continued to do so (Callicott, 1991; Cronon, 1996; Cruikshank, 2005).

The ways that the concept of wilderness and environmental conservation have evolved in Canada over the past century cannot be disentangled from colonialism and the settler-colonial relationship. Arguments for 'wilderness' have been used by environmentalists and conservation movements for decades to promote the protection of species, habitats, and recreational spaces, and to oppose the expansion of industrial activity and the extraction of natural resources. From coast to coast to coast, landscapes with varying degrees of human alteration have been constructed, imagined, and protected as wilderness (Loo, 2001; Braun, 2002; Sandlos, 2003). For more than a century, conservation has been characterized by the values of settler society being imposed on local, primarily Indigenous, peoples (Binnema & Niemi, 2006; Craig-Dupont, 2011; MacLaren, 2011). In the twenty-first century, some believe this to be changing; efforts are now made in environmental conservation to work with local and Indigenous populations to overcome the colonial decision making processes that characterized much of the twentieth century. But the legacies of colonialism and the deeply engrained ideologies of Canadian environmentalism present hurdles to achieving the shift that Indigenous peoples have long called for. This thesis critically examines the engagement of environmental conservation with First Nations through an exploration of the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement in Yukon Territory's Peel Watershed.

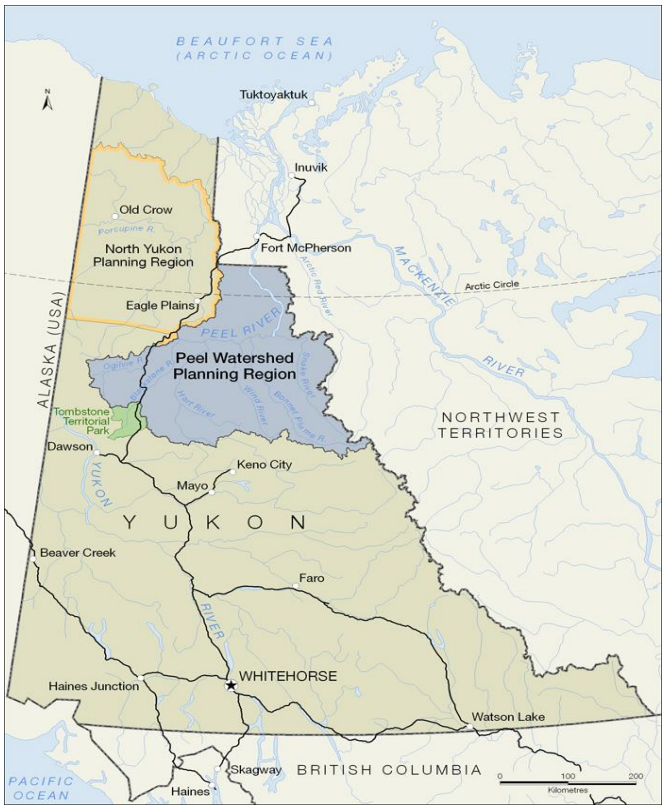
The Peel Watershed

Like so many others, my first encounter with the Peel Watershed was, ironically, through a bumper sticker. I arrived in Yukon Territory in the summer of 2014 to spend the month of July hiking in the expansive terrain of mountains, valleys, and rivers. Around this time, Yukoners were anxiously awaiting a decision on the lawsuit of three Yukon First Nations and two conservation groups against the

Yukon Government concerning modifications to the Peel Watershed land use plan. But I didn't know that yet; and I didn't begin to learn it until, time and again, the ubiquitous phrase, 'Protect the Peel', greeted me from someone's car bumper.

Yukon Territory, like the Canadian North as a whole, is cloaked with preconceived and oft-called 'romantic' associations. Fantastical stories of Arctic exploration, gold, and the midnight sun have been produced and reproduced for non-Northern audiences in Canada and around the world. In Yukon Territory, the Klondike Gold Rush, mining, and wilderness are what most Canadians know, fueled by the poetry of Robert Service, the novels of Jack London, the tourism industry, and the stories and myths that find their way south.

Map 1: Yukon Territory (Wikipedia)



Map 2: Peel Watershed Planning Commission Regional Map, 2007

Situated in northeast Yukon Territory, the Peel Watershed (Map 2; Image 1) is, for many, the definition of remote: accessible only by float plane, 'open' to tourism three months a year, and without permanent human inhabitants and relatively little evidence to indicate a human presence. For those outside Yukon Territory, the Peel is beyond the scope of imagination due to geography, a distant and far away land in a part of Canada already imagined as distant and far away. Few outside of Yukon Territory know where the Peel Watershed is and most will never set foot in it. From the perspective of most Canadians and many Yukoners, the Peel Watershed is a remote wilderness, defined by its intact ecosystems, lack of roads, and relatively minimal human impact. But for First Nations in northern Yukon Territory, the Peel Watershed is home; it is a landscape that they have used, occupied, and connected to for generations, and one that continues to sustain them.[3]

Image 1: Peel Watershed (Peepre, accessed 2017)

[3] In Canada, First Nations is used to refer to those Indigenous peoples who are not Metis or Inuit. In Yukon Territory, First Nations refers to the individual self-governing First Nations (Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, Na-Cho Nyak Dun), while First Nations or First Nations peoples is used to refer to the people themselves. The term Indian, defined in the *Indian Act* of 1876, is still a legal definition; it is both used by First Nations peoples in Yukon and considered derogatory or racist when non-First Nations peoples use it towards First Nations peoples. In addition to using 'Indigenous peoples' to speak of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples across Canada or Indigenous peoples around the world, I will use 'First Nations' to refer to self-governing Yukon First Nations and First Nations peoples, as this is the term used in Yukon Territory and enshrined in the Umbrella Final Agreement.

Map 3: Yukon Territory Town Map (Explore North, accessed 2017)

The field site for this research is not only the Peel Watershed, but the entire Yukon Territory, where understandings and narratives of the Peel Watershed have both shaped and been shaped by the conservation movement in diverse and complex ways. Whitehorse, the territorial capital, is home to the majority of Yukon's population, as well as most territorial government employees, tourism operators, and Yukon's two conservation groups.[4] The towns of Mayo, Dawson, and Old Crow, Yukon, and Fort McPherson, Northwest Territories (see Map 3) are also important research sites, because it is in these

[4] Of Yukon Territory's 38,293 population (Yukon Government, 2015b), 25,150 (roughly 75%) live in Whitehorse (Yukon Government, 2015a).

communities that three of the four First Nations whose traditional territory overlaps with the watershed have their government offices and where the majority of their populations reside.[5] Non-First Nations populations in these communities also have invested interest in the Peel Watershed, whether for mining, tourism, or recreation, and many have been heavily involved in the 'Protect the Peel' campaign and the land use planning process.

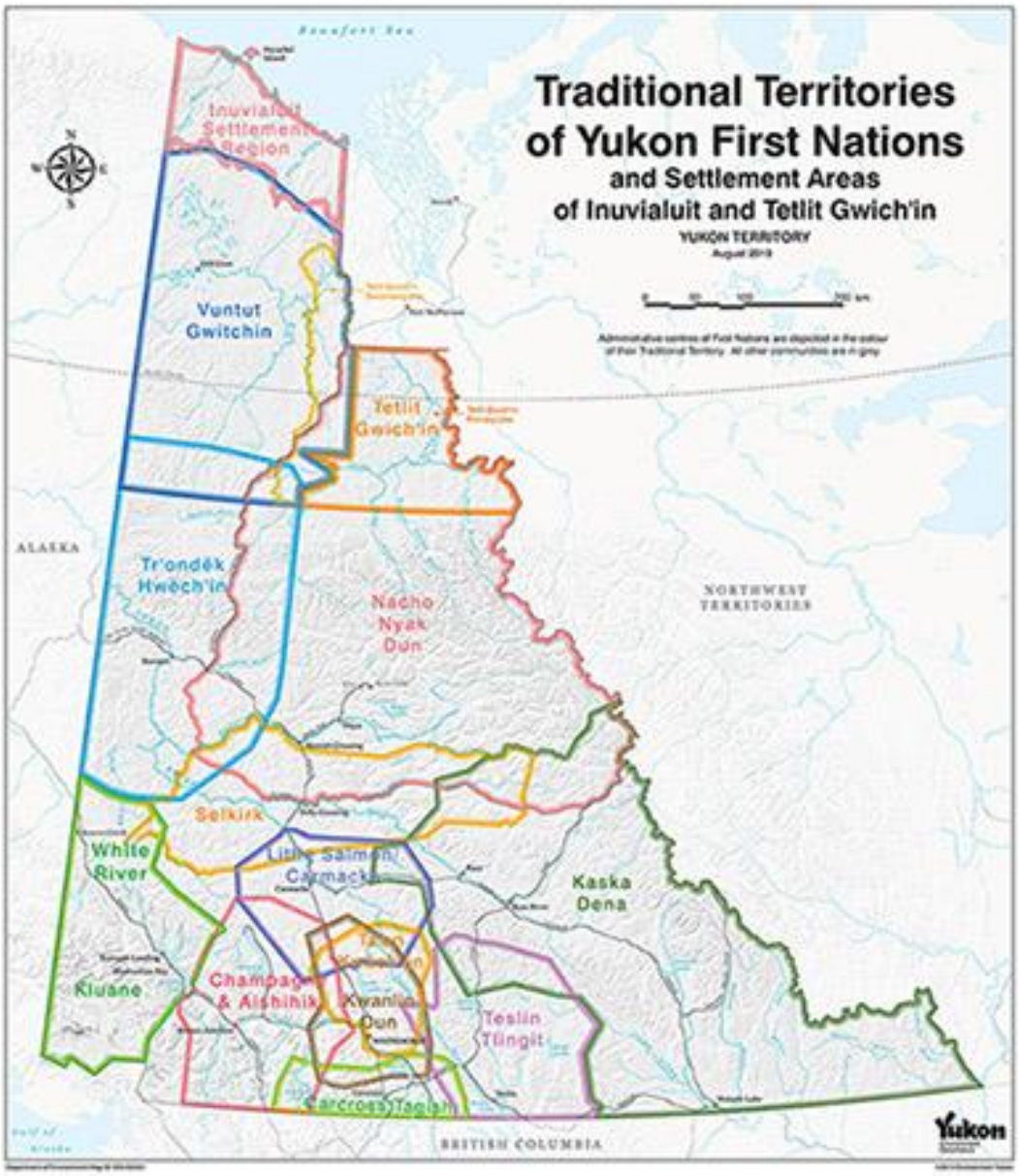
The Peel Watershed comprises 67,431 square kilometers of land that is uninhabited by permanent human settlements; it is home to a diversity of fish and wildlife populations such as moose, caribou, dall sheep, and grizzly bear; and it contains gas, oil and mineral deposits (Staples et al., 2013). Located at the far northern end of the Rocky Mountain chain, the Peel Watershed consists of the Peel River as well as six tributaries – the Ogilvie, Blackstone, Hart, Wind, Snake and Bonnet Plume Rivers (Protect the Peel, 2015a). The watershed is the traditional territory of four First Nations – the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, Na-Cho Nyak Dun, and Vuntut Gwitchin First Nations in Yukon Territory and the Tetłit Gwich'in Council in the Northwest Territories (Map 4). Together they manage 2.7% of the land while the Yukon Government holds the remaining 97.3% (Staples et al., 2013). As First Nations say, the Peel Watershed has been their home since time immemorial.

Eleven of fourteen First Nations in Yukon Territory are self-governing.[6] These eleven First Nations signed Final Agreements with both Yukon Government and the Government of Canada beginning in 1995, which removed them from the *Indian Act* band structure which preceded these agreements (Yukon Government, 2016). Until the completion of Final Agreements, Yukon First Nations peoples and their lands were controlled by the Canadian state, despite the fact that, unlike much of Canada, no land transfers were ever negotiated (Nadasdy, 2012). Final Agreements "are modern day

[5] The populations of Mayo, Dawson, and Old Crow, Yukon are roughly 420, 1,860, and 280, respectively (Ibid), while Fort McPherson, NWT has a population of roughly 900 (Hamlet of Fort McPherson, 2010). I was not able to travel to the community of Old Crow during my fieldwork, in part because it is a fly-in community, but was able to interview one resident/Elder and one resident/government employee over the phone.

[6] The three unsigned Yukon First Nations are currently in the negotiation process (Yukon Government, 2016).

treaties protected under section 35 of the Constitution of Canada on the rights of Aboriginal peoples," which establish the rights of the First Nation and its citizens and determine the interaction between the three governments – the First Nation, Yukon Territory, and Canada (Yukon Government, 2016). Political decision-making involving First Nations in Yukon Territory now proceeds, at least in theory, on a government to government basis.



Map 4: Traditional Territories of Yukon First Nations (Yukon Government, 2017)

The four First Nations whose traditional territory overlaps with the Peel Watershed are:

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation

The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in (TH) reside primarily in and around Dawson, Yukon. They have traditional territory in the western Peel Watershed. Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in translates to as 'People of the River'. The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in were heavily impacted heavily by the Klondike Gold Rush of the 1890s and the long history of mining that has followed on their lands since. TH signed its Final Agreement in 1998 (Yukon Government, 2016).

Na-Cho Nyak Dun First Nation

The Na-Cho Nyak Dun (NND) reside primarily in Mayo, Yukon, along the Stewart River. Na-Cho Nyak Dun translates as 'Big River People' and their traditional territory overlaps with much of the central and eastern Peel Watershed. Na-Cho Nyak Dun were among the first four Yukon First Nations to sign their Final Agreement in 1995 (Yukon Government, 2016).

Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation

The Vuntut Gwitchin (VG) live in the small, fly-in community of Old Crow, the most northern community in Yukon Territory. The Vuntut Gwitchin are part of the larger Gwich'in Nation, which extends into modern day Northwest Territories and Alaska. Vuntut Gwitchin translates to 'People of the Lakes' and VG traditional territory overlaps with the northwest Peel Watershed as well as much of northern Yukon Territory and northeast Alaska (First Nations Interview #4). Vuntut Gwitchin were also one of the first four Yukon First Nations to sign their Final Agreement in 1995 (Yukon Government, 2016).

Tetlit Gwich'in Council

The Tetlit Gwich'in Council (TG) reside in the hamlet of Fort McPherson, Northwest Territories, along the Peel River. While TG is not a Yukon First Nation, they have arguably the largest stake in the future of the Peel Watershed due to the fact that their home is at the mouth of the Peel River and downstream from the entire watershed. Tetlit Gwich'in translates to 'Peoples of the Headwaters' (Hamlet of Fort McPherson, 2010). The Tetlit Gwich'in Council signed the *Gwich'in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement* in 1992 with the Government of Canada (Canada, 1992).

Land use planning and conservation in the Peel Watershed

In 2004, the Yukon Government constituted the Peel Watershed Planning Commission (PWPC) to develop a land-use plan for the region (Staples et al., 2013). The Peel Watershed is one of eight planning regions in Yukon Territory (see Map 2 for the Peel planning region). Land use planning in Yukon Territory follows the Umbrella Final Agreement (UFA),[7] which, as Staples et al. (2013) state,

> laid out a process for land use planning in the territory, a process intended to manage how settlement and non-settlement lands (land not managed by First Nations) should be used by different stakeholders in order to minimize conflicts between them (p. 143).

The Na-Cho Nyak Dun, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, and Vuntut Gwitchin First Nations, as well as the Tetlit Gwich'in Council, the Yukon Government, Yukon conservation groups, and various stakeholders engaged in a seven year planning process, which resulted in the *Final Recommended Plan*, released by the PWPC in 2011. The plan called for 55% of the watershed to receive "permanent protection," with 25%

[7] The Umbrella Final Agreement (UFA) was signed in 1993 between the governments of Canada and Yukon Territory and the Council of Yukon Indians. The UFA established the framework from which individual First Nations could then negotiate their own Final Agreements (Staples et al., 2013).

receiving “interim Wilderness Area protection” and 20% left open for development (Protect the Peel, 2015a).

All parties engaged in the planning process then had the option to accept, reject, or modify the *Final Recommended Plan*; all accepted the plan except the Yukon Government, which “suggested modifications to it, arguing that the land designations within the Plan ‘[were] polarized and focus[ed] on either end of the spectrum’” (Staples et al., 2013, p. 148). In January 2014, the Yukon Government released its modifications to the *Final Recommended Plan*, which they then approved (Gryzbowski, 2014). These modifications altered the designated percentage of land to be protected to 29%, with “71% of the region being opened up for mineral and oil and gas staking”, effectively reversing the conclusions reached by the Planning Commission over the seven-year planning process (Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Yukon Chapter, 2015).

Following the Yukon Government’s modifications to the *Final Recommended Plan* and release of their own plan, three Yukon First Nations and two Yukon conservation groups took the government to court. In July 2014, they received a successful ruling on their appeal that Yukon Government “failed to honour its treaty obligations with respect to the Peel Watershed Land Use Plan” (Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Yukon Chapter, 2015).[8] The Yukon Government went on to appeal the Yukon Supreme Court’s decision in August 2015 and saw their appeal rejected in November 2015 (CBC News, 2015). In June 2016, the Supreme Court of Canada agreed to hear the case; the hearing occurred on March 22, 2017 and, at the time of writing, a decision has not been released.

[8] The case *First Nation of Nacho Nyak Dun, et al. v. Government of Yukon* consists of First Nations of Nacho Nyak Dun, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and Vuntut Gwitch’in, and Yukon’s two conservation groups, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Yukon Chapter and the Yukon Conservation Society, whom are collectively represented by Justice Thomas Berger.

The three conservation groups campaigning in the Peel Watershed are:

Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Yukon Chapter (CPAWS, Yukon)

The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society was created in 1963, while CPAWS, Yukon was established in 1992 (Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Yukon Chapter, 2016) to prevent mining in the eastern Peel Watershed. CPAWS largely led the conservation campaign in the Peel Watershed from the early 1990s through to the present day. Working with other conservation groups and local First Nations, CPAWS developed the *Three Rivers Campaign* and, later, the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement (CPAWS Interview #2). CPAWS also orchestrated the court case against the Yukon Government following the government's modifications to the *Final Recommended Plan* (Tourism Interview #5).

Yukon Conservation Society (YCS)

YCS began in 1968 and has since played a fundamental role in education, research, and public policy input in Yukon Territory (Yukon Conservation Society, 2016). YCS has been a central actor in the Peel Watershed land use planning process and the 'Protect the Peel' campaign, as well as other land use planning processes such as the Dawson Regional Planning Commission. And as noted, YCS stands alongside CPAWS and three Yukon First Nations in the legal case against Yukon Government; but unlike CPAWS, the Peel is only one of many areas of focus for YCS (Ibid).

Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y)

Y2Y is not based in Yukon Territory but has offices in Canmore, Alberta and Bozeman, Montana, reflecting Y2Y's conservation focus on the Rocky Mountain chain extending from Yellowstone National

Park to the Peel Watershed. Because of its geographic separation and the large role played by CPAWS and YCS in the Peel Watershed already, Y2Y's involvement in the Peel is minimal. Y2Y does, however, list the Peel Watershed as one of its 'Hot Projects' (Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, 2016a) and works to educate the public about the Peel Watershed while supporting CPAWS and YCS in their campaign efforts (YCS Interview #1; Y2Y Interview #1).

The conflict surrounding the Peel Watershed is one between First Nations governments and the Yukon Government over the land use planning process and the interpretation of First Nations' Final Agreements. Yet conservation groups have played a large role in the Peel Watershed since the early 1990s and have shaped the land use planning process, public awareness of the watershed, and legal proceedings against Yukon Government in powerful ways. Conservation groups have successfully orchestrated a nation-wide environmental campaign around the Peel Watershed by aligning their cause with Yukon First Nations to promote protection for mutual benefit. Some have suggested that this relationship illustrates aspects of a 'new conservation paradigm' that sees First Nations and conservation groups working together instead of in opposition, reversing historic trends of conservation being imposed upon local and Indigenous peoples (Stevens, 2014; CPAWS Interview #1; Y2Y Interview #1).

Like environmental movements elsewhere in Canada, the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement has relied upon well-established environmental narratives. These narratives value 'wilderness', species and habitat health, and environmental protection, while opposing human developments such as roads, mines, and the exploration and exploitation of minerals, oil, and gas. By speaking to these well known environmental themes, and by speaking about a landscape that is often compared to Scotland, Ireland, Nova Scotia, or New Brunswick in size, the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement has been successful in raising awareness about the Peel Watershed and

garnering support for its protection in Yukon Territory, across Canada, and internationally. This widespread support is illustrated in the national and international public submissions to the Yukon Government in favour of protection, as well as in the growing numbers of tourists who visit the watershed every year (Yukon Government, 2013; Tourism Interview #5).

The concept of wilderness has played a central role in the Peel campaign, despite the years that critical deconstructionists and Indigenous peoples have spent pointing to its flaws. The Peel Watershed deserves special attention because of the ways that wilderness continues to be invoked in the environmental conservation narrative while First Nations, following the Final Agreements, simultaneously develop stronger governance, a reconnection to their culture and traditional practices, and actively participate in land use planning and the Peel campaign.

In Yukon Territory, conservation issues are always First Nations issues. This has been illustrated in the Peel Watershed, where four self-governing First Nations have played a central role in land-use planning, the 'Protect the Peel' campaign, and legal challenges against the Yukon Government. The relationship between First Nations and conservation groups in Yukon Territory is shaped by the settlement of land claims and First Nations self-government. In the Peel Watershed, the two groups come together to achieve independent but overlapping goals. But where many conservation movements have failed to align with, and gain the support of, local Indigenous peoples, the Peel campaign has, in the eyes of many, succeeded.

By constructing a conservation movement that spoke to both conservation goals and the goals of First Nations, while also working to engage and empower all peoples with invested interest in the Peel Watershed, the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement began to address the long and problematic history of environmental conservation in Canada; it opened up questions about the power relations at play in land use planning, natural resource management, and environmental conservation in

Yukon Territory and elsewhere; and it reconsidered the concept of wilderness by acknowledging that, as Pojar (2006) states, “wilderness in the Yukon includes people and their traditional activities” (p. 21). Whether as a wilderness, an intact ecosystem, or a First Nations homeland, the Peel Watershed is shaped by the discourse, imagery, and power of people and processes inside and outside Yukon Territory. In this way, the watershed is social, a ‘nature’ that is inextricably entangled with ‘culture’.

Through three distinct but interconnected arguments, presented in three empirically-based, analytical chapters, this thesis examines environmental conservation in the twenty-first century, explores the complex process of conservation in Yukon Territory, and illustrates why the ‘Protect the Peel’ conservation movement has been relatively successful in its engagement with First Nations in the Peel Watershed. By examining a) the ways that colonial processes and, more recently, First Nations Final Agreements, have shaped, or territorialized, the Peel Watershed; b) the role that the concept of wilderness plays in the ‘Protect the Peel’ conservation movement; and c) the evolving relationship between conservation groups and First Nations in the Peel Watershed, I argue that the engagement of environmental conservation with First Nations throughout the ‘Protect the Peel’ conservation movement provides important insight for environmental conservation movements across Canada, as conservation attempts to transcend its historically contentious relationship with Indigenous peoples, initiate a more collaborative conservation model, and help shape a path towards reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Key Concepts and Debates:

This thesis takes a political ecology approach, using critical deconstructions of wilderness and social natures literature as a starting point for examining the social, political, and environmental

processes taking place in the Peel Watershed. This thesis also engages strongly with colonialism, Indigenous knowledge, and reconciliation literature in order to put the experiences expressed by First Nations in the Peel Watershed into a wider geographic, political, and historical context. Finally, this thesis engages with radical environmental literature to better understand how contemporary conservation efforts in the Peel Watershed and Yukon Territory fit into larger environmental discussions about climate change, environmental management, and the value of wild nature that are taking place nationally and globally.

Colonialism, Indigenous knowledge, and reconciliation

Any discussion of the ways that environmental conservation has impacted the lives, livelihoods, and traditional practices of Indigenous peoples must come with an acknowledgement of the complex and ongoing effects of colonization. Important scholarship has examined the devastating ways that colonialism has contributed to, if not directly caused, many of the current social, political, economic, and cultural challenges faced by Indigenous peoples across Canada (Coates, 1991; Harris, 2002; Nadasdy, 2003; Coulthard, 2014; Monchalin, 2016). In Yukon Territory, the effects of colonialism, particularly the residential school system, are still felt. Extensive physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, the removal of children from their families, and the loss of language, culture, and connection to the land all exist within the memories and experiences of many people today and present contemporary First Nations with ongoing challenges (Coates, 1991; Nadasdy, 2003; Natcher & Davis, 2007). But as some scholarship has noted, self-governing Yukon First Nations use their newly acquired political autonomy to not only exercise a political and economic power that they have been denied for over a century, but also to reassert connections to land, culture, and traditional practices (Slowey, 2009, 2015; Nadasdy, 2012).

These efforts illustrate how First Nations governments and peoples are attempting to reclaim power and rally against the long and still unfolding processes of colonialism.

Adding to critical histories on colonial encounters in Canada, the violent and racist state practices of control and assimilation, and the lasting effects of these practices on Indigenous populations, a growing body of literature discusses recent attempts to reach a place of decolonization and reconciliation. Reconciliation is understood in a number of different ways in Canada[9]; this study will proceed with an understanding of reconciliation as "the act of restoring estranged or damaged social and political relationships" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 107). But as Saul (2014) critically reminds us, "'reconciliation' is not an event. It is not an apology, although an apology was necessary" (p. 16). Despite then-prime minister Stephen Harper's 2008 apology to Indigenous peoples across Canada for the devastating experiences and legacies of church-run, government sponsored residential schools referenced here by Saul, scholarship from Nadasdy (2005b), Coulthard (2014), and Youdelis (2016) all questions the degree to which reconciliation and decolonization is actually sought by Canada. This work argues that despite strides taken towards increased political, economic, social, and intellectual recognition in the Canadian settler-state, Canada has merely reasserted its colonial domination over Indigenous peoples by finding new ways to dispossess Indigenous peoples of land, rights, and access to resources, all while placing significant barriers to Indigenous pursuits of land claims and self-governance.

As Nadasdy (1999, 2002, 2003, 2005b) and others (Cruikshank, 2005; Natcher & Davis, 2007) point out, First Nations governments in Yukon Territory are forced to demonstrate 'capacity' as defined by the Euro-Canadian governance model before power can be devolved to them, translate their knowledge into a Euro-Canadian scientific framework in land use planning and natural resource management, and use their own time and resources to ensure that consultation is properly followed by

[9] See Coulthard (2014) for a discussion of the various ways that reconciliation is understood in Canada (p. 106-107).

industry and the state. These challenges demonstrate what some (Nadasdy, 2005b; Coulthard, 2014; Youdelis, 2016) call an *antipolitics,* which gives a perceived level of power to First Nations but largely leaves the structures of knowledge, governance, and the sovereign rule of the Crown in place. As I will show, colonial structures of power have been challenged to some degree in Yukon Territory by First Nations Final Agreements, but many of the reconciliatory politics unfolding across Canada, such as continued Indigenous struggles for sovereignty, land rights, and the inclusion of traditional laws, can also be seen in Yukon Territory.

Recent scholarship has increasingly drawn the connection between Indigenous peoples and conservation, both in Canada (Nadasdy, 1999; 2012; Davis, 2011; Low & Shaw, 2011; Sandlos, 2014) and internationally (Dove, 2006; Ross et al., 2011; Paulston, 2012; Stevens, 2014). At the global scale, Stevens (2014) suggests that a paradigm shift in conservation has occurred, which

> envisions conservation that does not displace Indigenous peoples, exclude them from full and effective participation in protected area governance, impose regulations and management practices on them, violate their rights, prevent them from carrying out their responsibilities, or deny them their fair share of benefits (p. 7).

This 'new conservation paradigm' comes with the recognition that conservation initiatives have long marginalized and displaced Indigenous populations due to both conservation models such as the fortress model[10], as well as hierarchical conservation governing structures that place environmental governance in the hands of the state instead of local populations (Paulston et al., 2012; Stevens, 2014; Sandlos, 2014). This conservation model, MacLaren (2011) argues, effectively works to remove power from local peoples in making decisions about the landscape while often displacing, disenfranchising, and marginalizing them in the process.

[10] The 'fortress model' or 'Yellowstone model' of conservation follows US conservation practice as first demonstrated in Yellowstone National Park and followed elsewhere. This model is characterized by the removal of all peoples from the conservation area, the bordering of the area, and the strict management of practices and visitation within the area. The fortress model has spread from the US National Park system around the world, often conflicting with local populations (Stevens, 2014).

In Canada, First Nations have historically had, and continue to have, an unsurprising suspicion of conservation projects (Martin, 2011). Writing of the Inuvialuit First Nation in Yukon's North Slope, Martin (2011) states that apprehensions about conservation in the form of a national park

> were often based on the knowledge of a long history of native displacement and exclusion at the hands of park managers, wildlife enforcement officers, and other conservation officials (p. 283).

The ways that conservation projects have displaced and marginalized Indigenous peoples in Canada has not been lost on scholars. Loo (2001), Braun (2002), Sandlos (2003, 2008, 2014), Binnema & Niemi (2006), Todd (2008), MacLaren (2011) and Neufeld (2011) all show how conservation initiatives have negatively impacted Indigenous peoples' lives, economies, spiritual practices, and claims to traditional territory.

Some scholarship has argued that the link between conservation and Indigenous peoples is made problematic by non-Indigenous constructions of what Indigenous connections to 'the environment' really are (Braun, 2002; Nadasdy, 2005a; Dove, 2006). Nadasdy (2005a) states that when it is asked, "Are Indigenous people conservationists?," the question is posed "in accordance with Euro-American cultural assumptions – not only about indigenous people, but also about conservation itself" (p.294). The assumption that First Nations people fit within the constructed identity of radical environmentalist because of an often misinterpreted connection to, or respect for, the land merely perpetuates essentialist tropes such as that of the ecologically noble savage, as well as non-Indigenous constructions of Indigenous authenticity and indigeneity (Braun, 2002; Nadasdy, 2005a).

The relationship between Indigenous peoples and environmentalism is complicated by complex Indigenous relationships to animals and the land, and by the "tendency [among environmentalists] to interpret First Nations behavior by Euro-American cultural standards and assumptions" (Nadasdy, 2005a). The recent attempts to include First Nations as central actors and decision-makers in

conservation projects, land use plans, and natural resource management often fail to realize that First Nations' engagement in conservation is an engagement in a discourse that is not their own and often does not reflect traditional understandings (Nadasdy, 1999, 2005a; Davis, 2011; Low & Shaw, 2011). As Nadasdy (1999) and others (Berkes, 1999; Cruikshank, 2005; Sandlos, 2014) argue, the translation of complex systems of Indigenous knowledge into the knowledge framework of Euro-Canadian conservation often simplifies and compartmentalizes Indigenous ways of seeing the world and reinforces the power dynamic between Indigenous peoples and the state.

The ever-growing body of critical literature that discusses the ways that Indigenous-settler relations in Canada have been grounded in violence, racism, and oppression serve to remind us that the realities of settler-colonialism still impact the lives of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples across Canada. This literature is essential because it offers insight into the complex processes that have shaped the lives and cultures of First Nations peoples in Yukon Territory and the Peel Watershed. This literature, as well as the knowledge shared by Yukon First Nations peoples, provides an important reminder that all contemporary relationships are rooted in, and shaped by, colonialism.

The deconstruction of the concept of wilderness

In order to examine efforts to move beyond a colonial conservation model that exerts power over Indigenous peoples, the ways that the concept of wilderness has served to construct landscapes as 'empty' or 'pristine' by ignoring the historical and ongoing presence of Indigenous peoples must be critically considered. The concept of wilderness continues to be invoked in the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement and Yukon Territory as a whole, leading to questions about both the colonial

legacies embedded in this continued use as well as the ways that First Nations political and cultural autonomy exists alongside the continued presence of the idea of wilderness.

Guiding my analysis into the ways that the concept of wilderness is invoked in connection to the Peel Watershed is the critical deconstruction of the concept of wilderness put forth by critical scholars in the last three decades (Callicott, 1991, 2008; Cronon, 1996; Binnema & Niemi, 2006; Lippai, 2014). Responding to the ways that wilderness has been constructed as an un-peopled and undeveloped landscape, in accordance with the US Wilderness Act of 1964,[11] deconstructionists have identified the concept of wilderness as problematic, racist, and socially constructed. As Callicott (1991) states, "[m]y discomfort is with an idea, the received concept of wilderness, not with the ecosystems so called" (p. 339). The scholarship that has examined the progression of the *idea* of wilderness traces the concept from the ways that it was used in the Bible and in religious contexts, as a dangerous place outside of society, to the Romantic period, as a sublime landscape opposed to modernity and the urban squalor of the Industrial Revolution, to the national parks movement in the US and Canada, where wilderness helped create and shape parks and protected areas from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day (Merchant, 1995; Cronon, 1996; Spence, 1999; Neumann, 2001; Loo, 2001; Binnema & Niemi, 2006; Sandlos, 2008; MacLaren, 2011).

Critical deconstructions of the concept of wilderness call into question the naturalness of 'wilderness' and 'nature' as well as the nature-culture dichotomy, which has, for centuries, been fundamental to understandings of wilderness, either as a hostile or desirable place. Moreover, this literature illustrates how the construction of wilderness as empty and un-peopled erases the historical and ongoing ways that Indigenous peoples use, occupy, and transform the landscape. Those who sought wilderness disqualified the presence of Indigenous peoples and ignored a settler history littered with

[11] The Wilderness Act, states: "A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain" (88th Congress, 1964, p. 1).

encounters with human-altered landscapes (Callicott, 1991). And when Indigenous peoples were acknowledged, they were often written into the wilderness along with the animals, forests, and mountain peaks (Binemma & Niemmi, 2006). For some, Indigenous alterations of so-called wilderness were not enough to exempt these places from being wilderness for the very reason that the Indigenous peoples who occupied them were viewed as wild themselves, fed by the theories of racial superiority, progress, and development that dominated the nineteenth and early-twentieth century (Cronon, 1996; Braun, 2002; Binemma & Niemi, 2006). But as encounters between Indigenous inhabitants and settlers and visitors increased, questions about the ways that 'wilderness' should be used, or not used, led to both cultural assumptions and legal designations, such as the 1964 US Wilderness Act and the Wilderness zoning designation in Canadian national parks, that determined wilderness to be a space in which people did not remain.

Colonial conceptions of wilderness have been present in Yukon Territory for decades and continue to complicate the relationship between First Nations and settlers. In recent years, the ways that the concept of wilderness was used to regulate the lives and livelihoods of First Nations peoples on their traditional territories, as occurred in Kluane National Park & Reserve in the mid-twentieth century, have been acknowledged and actively amended (Parks Canada, 2010). Yet many First Nations peoples in Yukon Territory still hold negative associations with the idea of wilderness for the ways that it was used as a tool of colonization while directly challenging their worldviews (Cruikshank, 2005).

The ongoing use of the concept of wilderness in connection to the Peel Watershed illustrates how, despite important scholarly deconstructions and challenges from Indigenous peoples themselves, the idea of wilderness remains firmly entrenched in Yukon Territory. 'Wilderness' continues to be invoked in tourism, in discussions of the watershed's landscape connectivity or intact ecosystem, and in expressions of the Peel as sacred and spiritual, where encounters with 'something bigger' present

themselves. The concept of wilderness has been reconsidered, redefined, and rearticulated in the Peel Watershed. In examining the ways that environmental conservation engages with First Nations in the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement, this thesis takes a critical look at how this historically problematic, racist, and colonial concept has been revised to fit the more reconciliatory conservation model aspired to in the Peel Watershed.

Social natures

As many have suggested (Callicott, 1991; Cronon, 1996; Castree & Braun, 2001; Braun, 2002; Lippai, 2014), environmental conservation movements and the concept of wilderness draw heavily on the division between nature and culture, encompassing dualisms such as modern-pre-modern, tame-wild, civilized-primitive, artificial-real, masculine-feminine (Braun, 2002). As Cronon (1996) states, these dualisms work to construct nature as external and "[encourage] us to believe we are separate from nature" (p. 22). Some critical work (Latour, 1993; Braun, 2002) has suggested that seeing the world as divided by these terms is a distinct characteristic of being modern. The quest for the pre-modern 'other' is strewn through historic and contemporary environmental movements and notions of wilderness, which not only informs the search for landscapes that appear unaltered by human beings and 'modernity', but also the search for primitive peoples that largely fit the same pre-modern characteristics (Loo, 2001; Braun, 2002; Binnema & Niemi, 2006).

Social natures is used to "indicate the inevitable intertwining of society and nature in any and all social and ecological projects" (Braun, 2002, p. 10). By drawing attention to social natures, scholars have called into question fixed understandings of nature and culture rooted in the problematic dichotomy (Latour, 1993; Castree & Braun, 2001; Braun, 2002). Critical deconstructions have led to a "cascade of

metaphors – hybrids, cyborgs, networks, knots, assemblages" (Braun, 2002, p. 10) that all attempt to undo the nature-culture dichotomy and reveal the ways in which everything is hybrid, to take Latour's (1993) metaphor. As Braun (2002) states, hybrid natures "[remind] us that almost everywhere … nature is socially produced" (p. 11).

Critiques of the perspective that nature and wilderness are socially produced have risen as powerfully as the work on social natures and deconstructions of wilderness. Responding particularly to Cronon's (1996) famous deconstruction of the concept of wilderness, radical environmental literature has challenged the perspectives and arguments of deconstructionists in an attempt to assert that nature is more *real* than *constructed*, and to counter what they believe to be an argument that works against environmental conservation and the immediate need to slow industrial development and stop further loss to species, habitats, and ecosystems around the world (Oeschlaeger, 1991; Evernden, 1999; Snyder, 2000; Jickling, 2009).

Following social natures literature, critical analysis of ecotourism, or wilderness tourism/adventure travel, as it is known in Yukon, points to the ways that it continues to proceed under dualistic associations of nature and culture (Braun, 2002; de la Barre, 2009, 2013; Lippai, 2014). Traveling to "off the beaten track," "undiscovered," or "pristine" nature, Braun (2002) argues, reflects a sense of nostalgia and loss; a mourning for places (and peoples) which represent a time before modernity and are thought to be "about to disappear" (p. 136). Here, 'nature' and 'wilderness' are constructed as external, a tourist destination and recreational space; this construction not only perpetuates the dichotomy of nature-culture but erases or essentializes the peoples that live there. Braun argues that a paradox lies here in the attempt to "leave culture behind," with the traveler's "appearance disturb[ing] the myths that sustain the journey, which therefore must be reiterated again and again" (Braun, 2002, p. 131).

Often disassociated with these myths are the economics that come with wilderness tourism (de la Barre, 2009, 2013; Braun, 2002). The commodification of wilderness experiences (bringing the market into nature) and advertising strategies that emphasize an authentic wilderness experience (bringing nature to the market) reveal the ways in which hybrid natures permeate supposedly authentic nature experiences. Yet wilderness tourism in Yukon and ecotourism elsewhere proceeds under a constructed division of nature and culture, which often fails to acknowledge the hybridity of the spaces and peoples it encounters.

Wilderness tourism both relies on and contributes to environmental conservation in the Peel Watershed and Yukon Territory. Since the 1990s, the Peel campaign has depended on the stories, art, photographs, and experiences of tourists in the Peel Watershed to elevate public awareness about the region and build a national conservation movement. The construction of the Peel Watershed as a landscape distinct from society, modernity, and culture (i.e. external nature) that in the near future may disappear, at least in its current 'undeveloped' form, draws tourists and adventure seekers from around the world (de la Barre, 2009, 2013; Up North Adventures, 2016a, 2016b; Ruby Range Adventures, 2016). The Yukon Government relies on narratives of 'pristine nature' and 'untouched wilderness' to attract tourists and feed its growing tourism industry. But the dichotomy-driven expectations of tourists are something that all Yukoners, but especially First Nations, must navigate. While First Nations continue to gain political, economic, and social power within the territory, tourism often proceeds through a reliance on actives – such as wilderness tourism – and narratives – such as the gold rush and the frontier – that have little place for them. The ways that social natures are increasingly emphasized in Yukon Territory through a focus on First Nations culture, multiple land uses, and local histories often run counter to the myths that draw so many to Yukon and the Peel Watershed in the first place.

Environmental philosophy and radical environmental literature

This thesis draws upon literature from environmental philosophy, environmental education, and radical environmental literature from the deep ecology movement to investigate some of the spiritual, emotional, and experiential characteristics of environmental conservation in the Peel Watershed. Responding to deconstructions of 'nature' and 'wilderness', as well as an increasing societal awareness of global environmental concerns such as climate change, species loss, and industrialization, environmental philosophy and radical environmental literature critically explores the human relationship with 'the environment' in order to examine the environmental challenges facing humanity. As Evernden (1999) argues, "[e]nvironment is never isolated from belief, and a discussion of environmentalism is inevitably also an account of the relationship of mind to nature" (p. x). While Snyder (2000) asserts that the current challenges facing humanity implore us to make speedy and lasting changes to our practices, philosophies, and ontologies. By examining human relationships to the environment, critical environmental literature seeks to look beyond the objective scientific studies of the non-human world central to the fields of biology, physical geography, and natural resource management. By exploring the diverse physical, social, economic, emotional, and spiritual connections between human beings and their environments, this literature digs at the root of environmental problems and poses radical solutions.

Critical environmental literature challenges the dominant paradigm of Cartesian objectivity by emphasizing participation in, and connection to, the non-human world (Evernden, 1999; Abram, 1996; Jickling, 2009). These works oppose rational and techno-scientific models of understanding that place human beings outside of their environments, dissolve the distinctions between subject and object, nonhuman and human, and nature and culture, and remind us that it is perilous to assume that "there can only be one 'right' version of reality" (Evernden, 1999, p. 73).

Literature from the field of environmental education also takes human experience in 'nature' as the basis for developing understandings of, and appreciation for, the natural world. These works take direct engagement as a means of promoting widespread cultural change to the way that human beings understand, connect to, and make decisions about the environment (Jickling, 2009; Blenkinsop, 2012; Derby et al, 2015). Derby et al. (2015) argue that settling for 'nature' that is created and controlled by human beings furthers the neoliberal agenda in which social natures are utilized to justify the increased exploitation of 'wilderness', or less-human impacted regions; while Jickling (2009) defends so-called 'romantic' understandings of the human relationship to the environment by proposing that it is often these 'romantic' ideas that pose important challenges to socially entrenched understandings by questioning the paradigm in which these understandings became normalized and offering radical solutions to environmental, social, and culture problems.

Following many of the tenets of environmental philosophy, the radical environmentalism of deep ecology also challenges Cartesian dualisms and the anthropocentric assumptions of the techno-scientific framework. Deep ecology's emphasis on "diversity, complexity and flourishing for all, human and more-than-human alike," has helped to guide environmental conservation away from dualistic constructions of nature as an external place to be protected and towards an understanding of the complex relationships that connect all beings (Blensiksop, 2012, p. 358). The ways that deep ecology "hinges on the idea that there is no ontological divide between human and nonhuman" (Oelschlaeger, 1991, p. 301) also reflects an ever-increasing alignment between the ideologies of environmental movements and Indigenous ontologies.

The ways that narratives of 'wilderness', spirituality, emotion, biodiversity, and connectivity have played a role in the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement reflect many of the theories, philosophies, and arguments presented in radical environmental literature. In order to critically explore

the grounds on which the concept of wilderness continues to exist in the Peel Watershed, despite years of critique from scholars and Indigenous peoples, examinations of 'wilderness' in this literature must be considered. Moreover, the increased autonomy of First Nations and the growing presence of Indigenous ontologies in environmental discussions globally offer important considerations for the ways that environmental ideologies and Indigenous perspectives align. As environmental conservation works towards a more collaborative relationship with Indigenous peoples, conservation values must respond to the calls put forth in radical environmental literature as well as to those of Indigenous peoples.

Thesis Outline:

This thesis is organized into six chapters, beginning with my introduction and discussion of key concepts and literature. In the second chapter, I discuss my research methodology, research site selection, and positionality.

In Chapter 3, I examine the concept of territory and territorialization in the Peel Watershed. I argue that colonial processes of territorialization altered First Nations connections to the Peel Watershed, as First Nations increasingly moved from land based livelihoods and seasonal migratory patterns to central communities and the wage-based economies of settler society. This shift allowed non-First Nations peoples to construct the watershed in new ways, either as a mining frontier or a pristine wilderness. In recent years, processes of colonial territorialization have been challenged by First Nations, who are now re-territorializing the Peel through self-government and a reconnection to traditional knowledge, cultural practices, and the land itself.

In Chapter 4, I examine the concept of wilderness in the Peel Watershed, tracing the concept from critical deconstructions and the ways that it continues to fit into problematic dualisms of nature

and culture to reconsiderations and re-articulations of ‘wilderness’, which attempt to acknowledge First Nations presence and the many ways that individuals connect to ‘nature’. I show how the ‘Protect the Peel’ conservation movement both acknowledged and worked to overcome the problematic colonial characteristics of the concept of wilderness that Yukon First Nations have long expressed opposition to. And I examine the many contemporary invocations of wilderness in the Peel Watershed and pose questions to why the concept remains integral, despite decades of critical scholarly deconstruction and open opposition from Indigenous peoples.

In Chapter 5, I critically analyze the relationship between First Nations and conservation groups in the Peel Watershed and the ‘Protect the Peel’ conservation movement. I examine this relationship in the context of other environmental movements, such as the Great Bear Rainforest in British Columbia and Clyde River, Nunavut, which have attempted to mend historic animosities between environmental conservation and Indigenous peoples. I argue that despite ongoing challenges, the ways that conservation groups in the Peel Watershed were able to engage with local First Nations throughout the Peel campaign demonstrate important steps towards a more reconciliatory conservation.

I conclude by suggesting that while environmental conservation in Yukon Territory has been advanced by the ways that First Nations and conservation groups have worked together in the Peel Watershed to achieve distinct but overlapping objectives, these are only steps in the direction of reconciliation, decolonization, and a new conservation paradigm. Yukon First Nations are working hard to increase their economic and political power, reconnect to their culture, and navigate the challenges left by more than a century of colonialism. Conservation groups, too, face challenges, as they work to improve relationships with Indigenous peoples who have been ostracized by colonial conservation practices, reconsider problematic environmental narratives, and adapt to the ever-changing realities presented by climate change. Yukon conservation groups have had the good fortune to be faced with

the challenge of working with, and being accountable to, self-governing First Nations. Environmental conservation in Yukon Territory *must* work with First Nations in ways that conservation in the rest of Canada *should*, but is generally not *required* to. As Indigenous peoples have pointed out for generations, environmental conservation that constructs the land as separate from human beings and their culture, imposes its perspectives on local peoples who have a different relationship with the land, and operates in a hierarchical governance structure that ignores the knowledge of local peoples is unlikely to serve any good to anyone, human or non-human.

In the Peel Watershed, Yukon Territory, and an increasing number of places across Canada, conservation groups, environmentalists, and settlers, have learned this through a direct engagement with Indigenous peoples. And through these engagements, relationships are formed and environmental conservation is reconsidered. Environmental conservation can no longer operate independently of the concerns of Indigenous peoples; instead, it must insert itself into the difficult, political, and highly complex debates that Indigenous peoples across Canada participate in every day. The Peel Watershed offers one example of this challenging but essential process.

Chapter 2

Methodology and Research Design

This research takes a critical look at the ways that environmental conservation engages with First Nations in the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement in Yukon Territory. Using a political ecology approach, I explore the complex process of environmental conservation in Yukon Territory's Peel Watershed using in-depth, semi-structured interviews and primary and secondary source analysis. Political ecology is useful to this research because it problematizes concepts, ideas, and processes while exploring the complex ways that human beings shape, and are shaped by, their environments. Political ecology seeks to move beyond expert-driven knowledge frameworks that often exclude local knowledge and local peoples and towards an identification of the power structures at play in knowledge creation and dissemination, land-use planning, and environmental governance (Coombes et al., 2012).

This research critically explores the process of territorialization in shaping the Peel Watershed, the concept of wilderness and the ways that it is invoked in environmental conservation, and the relationship between Yukon First Nations and Yukon conservation groups in the Peel Watershed and the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement. Examining diverse constructions and experiences of 'nature' and 'wilderness', First Nations participation in environmental decision-making, conservation, and land-use planning, and the complex and power-laden processes of environmental governance in Yukon Territory, this research explores how particular narratives about the environment inform conservation efforts. By examining the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement and the engagement of environmental conservation with First Nations, this research exposes the challenges, limitations, and opportunities of environmental conservation as it seeks to reconcile relations with Indigenous peoples in Yukon Territory and across Canada.

The overarching question guiding this research is: How does environmental conservation engage with First Nations in the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement? To answer this question, the research will ask:

1. How have colonial processes shaped, or territorialized, the Peel Watershed and how are self-governing First Nations challenging these processes?
2. What role does the concept of wilderness play in environmental conservation?
3. How does the Peel Watershed come to be constructed as a wilderness?
4. How are different groups invoking wilderness to describe the Peel Watershed and for what ends?
5. How do First Nations in Yukon Territory understand the Peel Watershed and do these understandings reflect, depart from, or challenge the understandings of conservation groups?
6. How has the relationship between First Nations and conservation groups evolved over the course of the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement and how might this relationship inform environmental conservation in other parts of Canada?

Research Design and Site Selection

To answer these questions, I conducted three months of fieldwork in Yukon Territory in the summer of 2016. During this time, I lived in Whitehorse and took multiple trips to communities in and around the Peel Watershed such as Mayo and Dawson, Yukon Territory and Fort McPherson, Northwest Territories. The primary method of research used was in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individuals and members of organizations and governments connected to the Peel Watershed, the Peel Watershed Land Use Planning Commission, the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement, tourism in

the Peel Watershed, and First Nations in the Peel Watershed. These interviews were supplemented with primary and secondary document analysis of government documents, public consultation documents, maps, land-use plans, newspaper clippings, films and literature, as well as everyday observations and interactions.

Ethics approval for this research was obtained through York University in accordance with York University's Ethics Review Board. Approval for this research was granted by the Yukon Scientists and Explorers Act License and research conducted with Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation was approved by the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation Heritage Department. Funding for this research was provided by the Northern Scientists Training Program (NSTP), the York University Research Cost Fund and Fieldwork Cost Fund, and the Canadian Conservation in a Global Context (CCGC) research project.

The ongoing discourse around ideas of nature and connections to the environment in the Peel Watershed land-use planning process and the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement makes it an ideal research site for exploring my research questions. What has unfolded in connection to the Peel Watershed in the last two to three decades reflects only the most recent in a long trend of debates in Canada around conservation and development, First Nations governance and political autonomy, and the place of industry, the state, and local populations in land use planning, environmental governance, and economic development. At the same time, new and evolving issues are exhibited, such as the increased participation of First Nations in the decision-making process, the evolving relationship between First Nations and conservation groups, and the place of First Nations traditional knowledge in understandings of the environment. In what began as a progressive planning process, the Peel Watershed Land Use Planning Commission and 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement have illustrated the challenges of incorporating various understandings of place and 'nature', numerous

visions for the future of the watershed, and an attempt to hear and respect all voices in the decision-making process, all within a complex and ever-changing governance framework.

The Peel Watershed is also an ideal place to explore both the old and changing ways that 'wilderness' is invoked in environmental conservation and understandings of nature. No longer can conflicts around industrial development projects be understood in dualistic terms that pose conservation against development. Diverse actors and multiple narratives reveal that the ways that the Peel Watershed comes to be known, whether as a 'wilderness', intact ecosystem, or traditional homeland of First Nations peoples, all inform desires to protect it. Despite important scholarship that in the 1990s and early-2000s successfully problematized the concept of wilderness, it is a concept that remains central in many contemporary environmental movements. The assertion that the Peel Watershed is "one of North America's largest intact ecosystems" (Protect the Peel, 2015b) and the plethora of 'wilderness' rhetoric used in tourism and environmental conservation literature reminds us of the concept's ongoing place in the narratives of Yukon Territory. Though many have recognized the problematic nature of the concept of wilderness and actively worked to construct environmental narratives in alternative ways, the idea of wilderness continues to be adapted to fit certain environments, deployed to achieve certain ends, and invoked by both settler and First Nations populations in Yukon today.

Finally, the Peel Watershed is an ideal place to explore how the increased political agency of First Nations is transforming environmental debates. The political autonomy possessed by self-governing Yukon First Nations is revealed in the high level of participation of First Nations in the Peel Watershed Planning Commission and the Peel Watershed legal proceedings. This participation also exemplifies a growing trend across Canada in which political and environmental decision-making no longer occurs without First Nations' participation (Slowey, 2009; Davis, 2011; Monchalin, 2016). Furthermore, the

effort to protect the Peel Watershed from being opened to mineral, oil, and gas exploration and exploitation provides an opportunity to explore the changing relationship between First Nations and conservation groups as they continue to work towards independent goals while attempting to support one another in mutually beneficial ways.

The challenges facing contemporary Yukon First Nations, from governance to participation in land use planning to incorporating traditional knowledge into decision making processes, reveals many of the complex and devastating legacies of colonialism (Nadasdy, 2002, 2012; Dacks, 2004; Natcher & Davis, 2007; Slowey, 2009, 2015). The loss of language and culture that came with residential schools and other assimilatory policies is still felt today, as many First Nations work to reconnect their families and communities and revive aspects of their culture lost in recent history (Nadasdy, 2003). Examining the efforts of First Nations governments and citizens to use their political agency to reconnect to traditional knowledge, culture, and the land itself reveal both the power held, and challenges faced, by First Nations in Yukon Territory.

As I was interested in obtaining qualitative information about the thoughts, feelings, experiences, and connections of individuals to the Peel Watershed, environmental conservation, and the concept of wilderness, the majority of my research was conducted though semi-structured, in person interviews. Over three months, I conducted 28 structured interviews with a diverse group of participants including five tourism operators/wilderness guides, two Yukon Government employees, four First Nations elders, seven First Nation government employees, seven conservation group directors and employees (past and present), and three artists/filmmakers.

Most of my research was conducted in Whitehorse. Being the territorial capital with a population of 24,150 (roughly 75% of Yukon's total population) (Yukon Government, 2015a), Whitehorse houses most government workers and documents, nearly all major tourism operators, and the offices of

Yukon's two conservation societies. Communities in Yukon are small in size and population, but provide important and diverse perspectives among residents. The population of Mayo, Yukon is approximately 420, while Dawson, Yukon's largest community, is approximately 1,860 (Yukon Government, 2015a). Moreover, Mayo is where the Nacho-Nyak Dun First Nations have their government office and a large portion of their population reside, while the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation office and population majority is located in Dawson. The insights provided by both First Nations and non-First Nations individuals in these communities, many of whom have deeply embedded personal, familial, and cultural connections to the Peel Watershed, were essential to this research. Conducting research in the communities is far different than conducting research in Whitehorse. While their small populations enable the researcher to quickly determine who to speak with regarding particular issues, there is a higher level of suspicion of researchers and others from 'outside' than there is in Whitehorse, where local people are more accustomed to the presence of newcomers, researchers, and government employees. As I will touch upon later, spending time in the communities and approaching research in a flexible, open, and respectful way enabled me to at least partly overcome the initial hesitation many community members had with my request for their time and cooperation.

Living in Whitehorse and traveling throughout the Territory over a three month period enabled me to familiarize myself with the community, attend community meetings and events, and participate in dialogue around environmental conservation and the Peel Watershed. I was able to gain a great deal of information and insight simply by interacting informally with members of the community from various backgrounds. Additionally, examining primary and secondary documents helped me to situate my research in the political, cultural, and economic context of Yukon. Gathering brochures from tourism organizations, examining the literature on relevant websites, and reading public consultation documents helped to further educate me on the debates around the Peel Watershed that have been occurring in the Territory for more than two decades.

My research process was designed to be open and flexible while maintaining a critical focus on my research questions (see Appendix 1 for sample interview questions). I conducted all semi-structured interviews throughout the research process with an understanding that the varying perspectives and experiences of the interview subject would largely dictate the subject-matter and structure of the interview. Though I approached each interviewed slightly differently, I maintained a focus on my research questions and worked to establish a conversational interview structure in order to keep interview subjects feeling safe and comfortable. Most interviews were loosely structured in that I had prepared questions and themes I hoped to address, but largely let the conversations flow naturally. This enabled me to develop a relationship of respect with the interview subject and allowed me to investigate deeper into complex and controversial topics. Interview questions and themes were continually adapted to the responses provided by interview subjects and the information gathered throughout the research process.

Approaching interviews with openness and flexibility enabled me to build off interviews and connect with valuable participants through the snowball research technique. I encountered suspicions or hesitations among some research participants, which largely stemmed from the fact that they did not know me or my research intentions. For the most part, however, the overall welcoming nature of people and communities in Yukon Territory and the general interest in my research topic proved invaluable to my fieldwork.

Positionality and the semi-structured interview

The long and problematic history of southern Canadian researchers conducting research in the Canadian North means that researchers must both acknowledge their place in reference to the locations

and populations in which they are conducting research as well as work to improve relationships with those among whom research is conducted (Korsmo & Graham, 2002). For me, this began with acknowledging and sharing where I came from, what drew me to Yukon Territory and my research topic, and what I hoped to get out of interviews and the research overall. I was continuously asked – by both interview participants and in casual conversation – where I came from, where I went to school, and if I had visited Yukon before. My having previously spent multiple summers in Yukon Territory and one week during the winter seemed to bring a level of comfort and trust to most inquirers, as it assured them that I had some knowledge of the territory and the various political, cultural, and social dynamics within it. That being said, I was still an 'outsider'. Nearly every interview began with me talking about myself, sharing my background, my research interests, and my goals for the research. This mutual sharing helped me to develop a reciprocal relationship with interview participants that went beyond questioner and respondent. Sharing stories and connections, discussing experiences, and finding mutual acquaintances only contributed positively to interviews and the research process.

As Smith (1999) illustrates, the very term 'research' is "inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism" (p. 1). Scholars such as Smith (1999), Wilson (2008), and Kovach (2009) have drawn important comparisons between problematic research processes and the extraction of natural resources, both of which extract from, and make decisions for, local peoples and regions with little consultation or benefit to communities or peoples. These scholars, as well as communities themselves, rightly demand a fundamental change to the research process. Problematic research practices are as much a part of the history of research in the Yukon Territory as anywhere. Missionaries, anthropologists, wildlife managers and geologists, government officials, and university researchers all performed research that not only objectified Indigenous peoples and their cultures but objectified the Canadian North as a whole (Bocking, 2011). Only in recent years are research practices changing.

Indigenous research methodologies have arisen in places where Indigenous peoples have historically been the subject of academic research, which conducted research "from a 'neutral' and 'objective' perspective based on the Western philosophy of 'scientific' purposes, all the while ignoring Indigenous epistemologies" (Nakamura, 2015, p. 168). To counter this process, efforts have been made to ensure that research conducted in the North benefits local peoples and communities at all stages of the research process (Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies, 2003). In many ways, the ethics and responsibilities now expected of those conducting research in the North can be seen to fit with Indigenous research methodologies as they are expressed by Wilson (2008), Kovach (2009), Nakamura (2015) and others.

A shift towards Indigenous research methodologies represents an effort to decolonize the research process (Nakamura, 2015; Kovach, 2009). As Hodge & Lester (2006) note, Indigenous research methodologies are "undertaken with communities (and prioritizing their concerns) as opposed to conventional research practice on Indigenous peoples that often projects a 'detached' (and objective) research position" (qtd. in Nakamura, 2015, p. 168). In a shift towards what he titles "an Indigenist paradigm" (Wilson, 2007, p. 193), Wilson (2008) calls for "relational accountability"; for Wilson, acknowledging and being accountable to relations means that as researchers, "[w]e are accountable to ourselves, the community, our environment or cosmos as a whole, and also to the idea or topics that we are researching" (p. 106). By engaging in an Indigenist paradigm, likened by Wilson (2007) to a feminist or Marxist research paradigm, both researchers and participants agree that if "spiritual and sacred elements are surrendered, then there is little left of [Indigenous] philosophies that will make any sense" (Hart, 2010, p. 6). Such a research approach may help researchers grapple with belief systems that are drastically different from their own, while at the same time eliminating colonizing aspects of research and returning power to research participants. As Nakamura (2015) notes, this is particularly applicable to peoples who have historically experienced marginalization by exploitative research practices.

Throughout my fieldwork season in Yukon Territory, it was essential that I acknowledge my positionality as a white, southern Canadian male representing a university institution, all of which played a role in the way my research was conducted, interpreted, and assembled. Positionality, or what Kovach (2009) calls "self-locating," refers to the acknowledgement by the researcher of their "perspective on the world" (p. 110). Kovach states that although "we can only interpret the world from the place of our experience" (p. 110), practicing this form of reflection allows the researcher to more clearly examine their "research purpose and motive" (p. 112). My research holds some, but not all elements of Indigenous methodologies as they are expressed by critical scholars. For example, while I believe that practicing relational accountability is useful for all research, whether engaged with Indigenous populations or not, my project is not community based and will not be community led. That being said, in my engagement with local, and particularly First Nations populations, an awareness and openness to the opinions, concerns, and desires of research participants was essential, especially when they diverge from my own understandings and beliefs. Although the research process in Yukon Territory is largely considered to be improving, thanks to the work of Northerners, non-First Nations researchers must constantly be aware that their attempts to gain insight into the lives, perspectives, and experiences of First Nations peoples will not always be met warmly, no matter how knowledgeable, open, and respectful the researcher considers them self to be.

My position as a non-First Nations person and a non-Yukoner certainly impacted the interview process, as did the time restraints on my research. In more than one occurrence, I was left feeling that my positionality had negatively impacted the interview and that a level of trust between the interviewee and interviewer had not been achieved. In my experience, this can largely be contributed to a lack of time spent with the research participant, where a relationship of trust and mutual understanding about the research or the information being provided could not be achieved in the course of a short interview. This experience in itself was a critical part of my learning process, as it illustrated the degree to which

some are connected to peoples and place, and how such embedded connections shape their knowledge and understanding. I was amazed and enlightened when one employee of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation informed me that when they host researchers, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in generally expect them to live in the community for a minimum of one year (First Nations Interview #9). Only then, she believed, can the researcher begin to scratch the surface of the First Nations' community, politics, culture, economy, and traditional practices. Though I was not granted the luxury of a year of fieldwork and though I do feel that my positionality impacted my research with First Nations participants (more so than non-First Nations) at times, the overall welcoming nature of people and my willingness to be flexible, open, and respectful helped to increase the level of trust with many interview subjects. This was revealed throughout the entire research process, as many interviewees were curious about whom I had already spoken with and were pleased to share names of friends, family members, and colleagues whom they believed would be essential for me to meet.

Of 28 interview participants, men comprised 18 and women 10, ranging in age from their late-20s to 80s. Nearly all interview subjects had either lived in Yukon Territory their entire life or for multiple decades and most were well-established within the community, both within their field or position and in society more generally. Interview subjects held diverse perspectives shaped by their backgrounds and experiences, which both reflected and diverged from the generally accepted sentiments expressed by others in their field and/or community. Almost without fail, every interview participant expressed what might be called a moderate position, reflecting that Yukoners do not think in dichotomous terms when it comes to questions of environmental conservation, politics, and industrial development; rather, they approach these topics from a more pragmatic perspective. Many attributed this to the small nature of Yukon's population and the necessity to respect others and their differences. This close-knit community aspect of Yukon also greatly impacted my research in that a large number of interview participants were identified through recommendations and sometimes personal introductions

by other participants. Most individuals and groups engaged in land-use planning, environmental conservation, tourism, and politics relating to the Peel Watershed were well aware of one another, no matter where their beliefs lay on the issue.

Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours, generally taking place during participants' work hours, either at their place of work, their home, or a local coffee shop. A few interviews took place outdoors, in bars and restaurants, or over the phone (when I could not travel to the participant's community or timing did not work out). All interviews were conducted in English and before each interview, interviewees were given a copy of an Informed Consent Form, which was then discussed and left with the participant. Interview participants were reminded that they could withdraw from participation in the research at any time and invited to follow up with me or York University regarding any questions or concerns about the interview or the research process. Participants then gave verbal consent to participating in this research project. The names of interview participants are not provided in this thesis in order to keep their identities private. This information is kept on file and will be disposed of at the completion of my Masters work.

All but two interviews were recorded using a digital recording device, which was placed between me and the interviewee. Using a recording device allowed the conversation to flow smoothly and allowed me to concentrate on the conversation and not on writing down the participant's responses. I also brought a notebook to each interview, where I jotted down ideas, notes, and questions. Two interview subjects requested that the recording device not be used. For these interviews, I wrote down their responses as best I could. All interviews were transcribed the day of or soon after the interview took place, ensuring that the conversation was fresh in my mind and allowing me to reflect on specific responses and make notes accordingly.

During interviews, I explored a variety of themes, largely dependent on the interview participant. Major themes explored in every interview included conceptions of 'nature' and 'wilderness', the participant's connection to the Peel Watershed, the Peel Watershed Planning Process, and the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement, and participant's feelings regarding environmental conservation, tourism, and industrial development in the Peel Watershed and Yukon Territory more generally. In each interview, certain themes were focused with specific participants. For example, the idea of wilderness and the role of 'wilderness' in environmental conservation held a large place in conversations with artists, environmental activists, and members of conservation groups; while personal connections to the Peel Watershed, the revival of traditional practices, and the importance of access to traditional territory were central topics of discussion with First Nations individuals and First Nations government employees.

Terms such as 'nature', 'the environment', 'conservation', 'natural resource management', and 'wilderness' must always be recognized as culturally constructed concepts. These concepts, the ways in which they are constructed, and the cultural implications of these constructions will all be further explored in later chapters. In interviews, terms were often clarified and placed into context by participants, while I worked in every interview to clearly articulate the ways I was understanding these concepts and using them in my questions. Overall, interviews were most successful when interview participants had a clear idea of the questions that I was interested in while at the same time feeling like they had the space to articulate their individual opinions and experiences.

Document Analysis

The language we use to convey our understandings of, and connections to, the world reveal a great deal about our culture. As Braun (2002) notes, that which is produced for the purposes of environmental conservation and conservation movements is a part of a discourse and "not nature itself; its knowledges are at once cultural and political, even as they engage with, and are shaped by, encounters with humans, animals, and other organisms" (p. 225). Moreover, the way this knowledge is produced, translated, transmitted, and deployed must always be considered in the context of power (Latour, 1986).

Though in-depth, semi-structured interviews were the central methodology used in my research, analysis of both primary and secondary documents helped to supplement information gathered in interviews and contextualize much of what was being expressed by participants. Critical primary and secondary source analysis enabled me to examine and better understand the cultural context from which sources emerge and are disseminated. Throughout the research process, discourses of conservation, development, wilderness, and nature were explored and analyzed. As a starting point, government documents produced by Yukon government and First Nations governments such as the Umbrella Final Agreement, First Nation Final Agreements, and various parks and land management plans helped me to understand many complex topics such as the management of First Nations settlement land and traditional territory, land-use planning, and protected area management. Maps were also analyzed to better understand the Peel Watershed Planning Commission's *Final Recommended Plan* and Yukon Government's subsequent modifications to the plan, as well as how these plans were then interpreted and utilized by various actors.

A large aspect of my document analysis consisted of interrogating the discourse in documents produced by conservation groups, the Yukon Government, First Nations, tourism operators, the Peel

legal proceedings, and the mining industry. As my research is concerned with the various understandings and depictions of a particular place, the narratives produced about the Peel Watershed are essential sources of analysis for my research. These documents included websites, pamphlets, books, short films, public speeches, op-ed pieces, reports, and public submissions to the Peel Watershed Planning Commission and the Yukon Government. Additionally, artistic mediums such as photography, film, and writing were analyzed for their depictions of the Peel Watershed and for their expressions of 'nature' and 'wilderness'. Online and print news articles allowed me to trace the development of this issue over the past two decades as well as gain insight into the ways that the land-use planning process, the Peel Watershed legal proceedings, and the conservation effort have been presented to the general public. And finally, journal articles and news stories published in large and international sources such as *National Geographic*, *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, *60 Minutes* and *Fusion News* helped provide insight into how issues surrounding the Peel Watershed were depicted at the national and international scale.

Fundamentally, this thesis examines a conservation movement more than emerged in the early 1990s and has grown and evolved over more than two decades (CPAWS Interview #2). Like conservation movements across Canada and globally, particular discourses have been produced to generate support for the campaign and achieve the overall goal: in this case, a maximum degree of environmental protection in the Peel Watershed. Important critical scholarship has explored the relationship between knowledge, discourse, and power in both the First Nations and the environmental context, and much of this insight must be considered in my examination of primary and secondary documents (Braun, 2002; Harris, 2002; Nadasdy, 2005; Cruikshank, 2005; Baldwin, 2009). How information is generated, disseminated, and deployed by conservation groups, environmental activists, the government, tourism, and First Nations must never be taken for granted and always be subject to critical examination. This critical examination provides a more holistic interpretation of how discourse is mobilized and entangled

in power relations. And, importantly, document analysis must be undertaken in conjunction with analysis of the thoughts, concerns, values, and experiences expressed in interviews.

Contributions and conclusions

Fundamental to Indigenous research methodologies and an improved relationship between researchers and local peoples is an acknowledgement that research is a two-way engagement. Led by communities historically subject to exploitative research practices, communities and research participants are increasingly asking, 'What's in it for us?' Following Smith (1999), Korsmo & Graham (2002), Wilson (2008), Kovach (2009) and others, researchers must design, carry out, and assemble their research in ways that involve and benefit local peoples and communities.

As noted, my research is not community driven or community led, though I, too, must consider what my research can offer those who took the time to share their perspectives and knowledge with me. At the most general level, my research offers local peoples a space to share their experiences and opinions on themes relating to environmental conservation and the Peel Watershed such as the land use planning process, environmental decision-making, conservation and the role of conservation groups, connections to the Peel, First Nations cultural revitalization, and the place of concepts such as wilderness. I acknowledge that I am my no means the first (or last, probably) person to take a critical look at these themes in the context of the Peel Watershed. My research will build upon existing research on the Peel Watershed and hopefully provide insights that can be useful to communities in Yukon Territory and people who are in some way directly connected to the Peel.

Although this thesis will be made accessible to all those who wish to read it, the writer is well aware that local peoples with whom this research was conducted will likely have little time or need to

consult it, much less read it in full. Following the completion of this thesis, I will make this information available – in condensed form – in other, more accessible ways that may include: publication in academic journals such as the *Northern Review*, published in Whitehorse and focused on Northern topics; publication in Yukon and regional magazines and newspapers such as *Up Here*, *North of Ordinary*, *Yukon News*, *Whitehorse Daily Star*, *Coast Mountain Culture*, and *Canadian Geographic*; and in synthesized, 1-2 page summaries that can be sent back to interview participants, community leaders, First Nations, conservation groups, the Yukon Government, tourism operators, and Yukon College.

Finally, it is my intention as the researcher to take this research with me when I return to Yukon Territory. This research will be assembled in such a way that it can be presented to communities or specific bodies (such as conservation groups), should they desire this. As I move forward, the insights and opinions provided by interview participants throughout this research process will be drawn upon and incorporated into whatever work I am privileged enough to find myself in.

In this chapter I have outlined my research questions, design, and approach, as well as the methods that I have used in conducting this research. Conducting my research with a political ecology approach has enabled me to critically examine the ways that people inside and outside of Yukon Territory know, construct, and experience the Peel Watershed and how this diverse array of actors shape ecological processes there. Entering the research process with flexibility, openness, and respect enabled me to integrate into the community, take in as much as possible, and adapt to the many changes, challenges, and insights that were presented throughout the research process.

The majority of my research questions were answered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with male and female participants of varying ages, experiences, and perspectives. In addition, informal engagement with the community, both in Whitehorse and in the communities I visited, was essential to developing a greater understanding of my research topic and the social, cultural, political,

environmental, and economic dynamics within Yukon Territory. Connections I established not only helped to provide me with assistance in locating interview participants, but also in accessing primary and secondary documents that were essential to my research.

Challenges of working within time constraints, gaining the trust of communities and interview participants, and conducting research from an 'outsider' perspective certainly presented themselves throughout the research process. These challenges, along with my positionality as a white, male, southern Canadian researcher must continually be reflected upon and interrogated. Despite these challenges, I am confident that the information I have gathered for and presented in this Masters thesis can positively contribute to conversations around First Nations self-government and the value of traditional knowledge in decision-making, the concept of wilderness and its role in contemporary environmental conservation, and the efforts of environmental conservation to overcome problematic and colonial relationships with Indigenous peoples across Canada and transition towards more reconciliatory relationships and a new vision of environmental conservation.

Chapter 3

Making and re-making the Peel Watershed: Examining the process of colonial territorialization and First Nations re-terrtiorialization

One of the most thrilling and enlightening experiences of my research was the time I was able to spend in the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation's Heritage office in Dawson. Everyone there was welcoming and supportive; they provided me with documents that they thought would be useful to my research as well as my perspective on First Nations traditional knowledge; they connected me with members of the community, Elders, and other government employees whom might provide useful perspectives on my research questions; and they allowed me to come to the Heritage office whenever it was open and use it as a work space. In the Heritage office I found a place of constant dialogue, learning, and cultural exchange. Heritage employees of both Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and non-First Nations decent, as well as Elders and local people (usually invited on business), came and went in a constant stream of interaction and communication, planning and reflection, working and conversation. One morning I walked in to a discussion on 'resources' that went something like this:

"There's got to be a better word than 'resources'. I mean, it doesn't fit with the First Nations' perspective at all."

"Yeah, it's very government. Something we will manage and control."

"As a word it completely erases the connections that people have with so-called 'resources'. Saying the caribou is a 'resource'? It's the same way that forestry companies treat the trees. Everything is so compartmentalized."

"It's the same way that corporations treat their employees."

"Yeah. But here we are, talking about 'resources'; we have a Natural 'Resources' Department; we're going to the table with Yukon Government to talk about 'resources'. It doesn't fit with the way this government thinks at all. Well, at least this department."

"What would the alternative be?"

"Umm ... I don't know. I guess there isn't one, because the whole idea of 'resources' is grounded in a way of thinking about that thing. It's separating it from yourself, from its connections and relations. Like how the Elders are always talking about everything being connected. You can't think that way and also think in terms of 'resources.'"

"I guess the alternative would be to just use the name; to call things by their name. Those trees, those caribou, those people."

"Yeah, I guess. But this office is stuck here speaking in language that in no way fits the way we think about this stuff."

Introduction

This thesis explores the engagement of Yukon conservation groups with Yukon First Nations by examining the conservation movement to protect the Peel Watershed from being opened up to industrial development. This examination will provide important insight for conservation movements across Canada and help inform the ways that environmentalism engages with First Nations governments, peoples, and politics. But this examination must ultimately begin with an acknowledgement and critical examination of the complex, enduring, and often devastating processes that colonialism brought to First Nations in the Peel Watershed, Yukon Territory, and across Canada. This chapter begins this examination by putting the Peel Watershed, Yukon First Nations, and First Nations-settler relations into a historical context. By doing so, I will illustrate how contemporary peoples, processes, politics, governments, and territory in the Peel Watershed, and Yukon Territory more generally, are shaped by the historical processes and ongoing legacies of colonialism.

Yukon's history, like that of Canada, is fraught with colonial violence and the dispossession of land, the decimation of Indigenous populations from diseases brought by settlers, the removal of children from their families and residential school abuses, the regulation and prohibition of traditional practices, and ongoing attempts at cultural assimilation, which threatened language, destroyed families and communities, and left lasting legacies of depression, substance abuse, violence, and economic struggle (Coates, 1991; Nadasdy, 2003; Dacks, 2004; Coates & Morrison, 2005; Natcher & Davis, 2007). Yukon's present is shaped by this colonial past, and ignoring or down-playing the large and sometimes tragic changes that the settler-colonial relationship brought is to ignore the ways that First Nations, as well as newcomer, experiences in Yukon Territory are still shaped by colonization today. While many scholars offer essential insight into this process of critical examination (Cruikshank, 1990, 2005; Coates,

1991; Nadasdy, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2012; Natcher & Davis, 2007; Slowey, 2009), it is ultimately the experiences and stories of First Nations people themselves that leads the ongoing process of learning.

The dialogue above illustrates some of the challenges that First Nations governments and First Nations peoples face every day. How do First Nations navigate between traditional knowledge, language, governance, and worldviews, and those that fit into the dominant Euro-Canadian model? How do First Nations meet the contemporary needs of their citizens without compromising the traditional values that have guided their peoples for generations? And how do First Nations not only begin to understand the complex and devastating legacies of the colonial period, but work to overcome them? Self-governing Yukon First Nations, like Indigenous peoples across Canada and all Canadians, are shaped by colonialism. And only when these historical processes come to light can we begin to make sense of the diverse ways that the Peel Watershed is shaped, experienced, and defined, as well as how conservation efforts to protect it emerge.

To help organize my exploration into the diverse colonial processes that First Nations in the Peel Watershed and Yukon Territory have encountered for more than two centuries, I critically examine territory and the process of territorialization in the Peel Watershed. I explore the colonial developments that altered First Nations' connections to the Peel as well as the lasting effects of the colonial relationship. And I examine how attempts to transcend the colonial relationship through First Nations Final Agreements and self-government, cultural revitalization, and active participation in land use planning and environmental decision-making have initiated a process of re-territorialization in the Peel Watershed.

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, Na-Cho Nyak Dun, Vuntut Gwitchin, and Tetłit Gwich'in First Nations peoples understand, experience, and connect to the Peel Watershed in ways that are different from non-First Nations peoples. These connections are rooted in countless generations of history. The

colonial period, lasting roughly from the mid-nineteenth century, when traders and later missionaries and miners arrived in the region, to the 1990s, when First Nations became self-governing, drastically altered the lives, livelihoods, and culture of First Nations in the Peel Watershed and severely disrupted First Nations connections to the watershed.[12] These connections are only recently being reasserted. By illustrating how colonial processes of territorialization and recent First Nations re-territorialization shaped, and continue to shape, the Peel Watershed, I will provide a starting point from which to explore how the Peel comes to be constructed as a 'wilderness' and the role that this construction plays in the conservation movement. And I will provide the context to examine the evolving relationship between Yukon First Nations and Yukon conservation groups and illustrate how conservation in the Peel Watershed may offer valuable lessons for conservation across Canada, as Canada and Canadians attempt to reach a place of reconciliation with Canada's Indigenous peoples.

Colonial histories, land claims, and the creation of territory

In critical geographic scholarship, territory and territorialization refer to the many ways that spaces and peoples within these spaces are controlled, bounded, and imbued with meaning (Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995; Lunstrum, 2009; Elden, 2010; Nadasdy, 2012). Elden (2010) states that territory is "the emergent concept of 'space' as a political category: owned, distributed, mapped, calculated, bordered and controlled" (p. 810). In this way, territory is always political. Much work has examined territory and processes of territorialization in state-making (Scott, 1998; Neumann, 2004;

[12] I determine the colonial period to begin when settlers arrived in the Peel region following the Hudson's Bay Company in 1839, but First Nations such as the Gwich'in did have an engagement with European trade economies since the late-1700s (Peepre & Locke, 2008). I state the colonial period ended with First Nations reaching self-government, though as both scholars (Nadasdy, 1999, 2002; Natcher & Davis, 2007; Monchalin, 2016) and interview participants have pointed out, the relationship between First Nations and the state still holds many colonial characteristics. For some, First Nations have always been self-governing, and recent land claims agreements merely represent a recognition of self-governance by the colonial state.

Elden, 2010). Neumann (2004) argues that "[s]tates come into *being* through ... the assertion of control over territory, resources, and people" (p. 202, *emphasis in original*). While Nadasdy (2012) points out that "internal territorialization is not always a top down process" in which the state is the sole actor (p. 506); in some cases, "political strategies … that [focus] on controlling people and processes through demarcation and control of space" may also be exercised by non-state, or internal, actors (p. 503). Elden (2010) calls the creation of territory "a violent act" due to the inclusions and exclusions that are inevitably enforced (p. 807), while Lunstrum (2009) remind us that territorialization is never an end-point but always a dynamic and ongoing process. Territory is continually being made, un-made, and re-made through the combined processes of de-territorialization and re-territorialization (Lunstrum, 2009).

Before exploring some of the contemporary challenges facing newly self-governing First Nations, from governance to land use planning to the incorporation of traditional knowledge, it is important to illustrate the intentional and unintentional ways that the arrival of newcomers, along with their epidemics, trade goods, religion, economies, government, and knowledge all helped to reshape, or re-territorialize, the Peel Watershed throughout the colonial period. These processes disconnected First Nations peoples from the land, disrupted trade networks, social relations, and traditional practices, and challenged or severed First Nations connections to language, culture, and traditional knowledge. The current challenges faced by First Nations and ongoing efforts to reconnect to the Peel Watershed are rooted in these colonial processes.

While the Peel Watershed and its people have been connected to European economies since the 1700s, the colonial period really began with the arrival of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1839 (Peepre & Locke, 2008).[13] Roman Catholic, and later Anglican, missionaries arrived in Gwich'in territory

[13] The Peel River's name reflects the legacy of colonialism. Like so many Canadian rivers, it was first 'discovered' by Europeans accidentally. Attempting to travel through the Mackenzie Delta in 1827, Sir John Franklin "mistakenly entered the lower Peel River" and, once "realizing that he was on a 'new-to-Europeans' river," named the river

in 1860, impacting local peoples through trade, religion, and disease (Ibid). Reflecting colonial encounters across the Americas, the Gwich'in population dropped up to 80% in the years following the arrival of missionaries and traders, and for decades these epidemics caused devastation among Indigenous peoples across the North (Ibid). Following epidemics, an ever-growing number of European traders, scientists, and surveyors vastly altered First Nations societies across Yukon throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, increasingly interrupting First Nations economies, social organization, and traditional patterns of loosely organized movement (Nadasdy, 2012).

In the 1890s, the Klondike Gold Rush brought tens of thousands of newcomers to the territory of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, resulting in social and cultural devastation to local peoples (Peepre & Locke, 2008). The 'strike-it-rich' mentality accompanying the Gold Rush quickly spread throughout the territory, with mineral discoveries far afield leading to the creation of towns like Mayo Landing on the Stewart River, within the traditional territory of the Na-Cho Nyak Dun (Ibid). Though many First Nations peoples continued to practice traditional livelihoods (as they still do today) and profited in new and unexpected ways (such as the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in selling meat to settlers in Dawson who would not have otherwise survived the winter (First Nations Interview #7)), First Nations peoples, culture, and relationships to the land were drastically impacted by these processes. This was in large part characterized by a move away from seasonal, land-based livelihoods and into communities and the wage economies of settler society (Peepre & Locke, 2008).

Critical anthropological work has pointed to many of the assumed understandings about the organization and territorial distribution of Yukon First Nations peoples before the arrival of federal officials in the 1940s and 1950s (Slobodin, 1962; McClellan, 1975, 1992; Cruikshank, 1990; Nadasdy, 2012). As Nadasdy (2012) notes, federal officials "began asserting control over the lands and peoples of

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after Sir Robert Peel, a British politician and two-term Prime Minister who never saw the river himself (Peepre & Locke, 2008, p. 62).

the Canadian north" following World War II, creating distinct First Nations 'bands' (p. 508). This shift from "widely scattered clusters of living groups" (qtd. in Nadasdy, 2012, p. 507) to distinct First Nations with 'traditional territories' was accompanied by a change in the relationship of First Nations to the land.

The administrative expansion of the Canadian federal government to Yukon Territory following WWII accompanied a renewed interest in resource development in the North (Slowey, 2009; Neufeld, 2011; Martin, 2011).[14] Slowey (2009) suggests that the Canadian government's "intervention in the economic and social spheres" of the North took on a model of rational state planning and central management, as the state "extended social policy and programming" to First Nations communities (p. 230). The 'development' of the North was assumed by policy-makers to include the development of the North's Indigenous population, building upon the *Indian Act*[15] policies of assimilation being applied elsewhere in Canada and giving rise to new policies like those included in the 1969 White Paper.[16]

Although land claims appeals to the Government of Canada and the Department of Indian Affairs were brought up numerous times since the Klondike Gold Rush at the end of the nineteenth century, it was in response to policies of assimilation and proposed resource development that First Nations land claims in Yukon Territory gained momentum and evolved into the form they take today (Neufeld, 2011). Discussing Yukon First Nations' response to the White Paper, Neufeld (2011) states that

[14] Sometimes referred to as "a second rush" (the first being the Klondike Gold Rush of the 1890s), the decades following the construction of the Alaska Highway in 1942-43 saw a second boom in settler population (Cruikshank, 1990).

[15] The *Indian Act* of 1876 was drafted with the intent of assimilating all Indigenous peoples into Canadian society. Restrictions over 'status', blood quantum, and the 'enfranchisement' (loss of status) of 'Indians' who "received a university degree, served in the military, or became a clergyman, lawyer, or doctor" all emphasized assimilation (Monchalin, 2016, p. 110). Revisions to the act in 1884 outlawed traditional ceremonies, celebrations, and practices. Modifications withdrawing some of these assimilatory policies did not appear until the mid-20th century (Ibid).

[16] The White Paper "advocated putting those with Indian status on equal footing with other Canadian citizens and, over a short time, abandoning the *Indian Act* and all the First Nation rights it guaranteed" (Monchalin, 2016, p. 118). The White Paper was primarily authored by Indian Affairs Minister Jean Chretien and was overwhelmingly opposed by Indigenous peoples, who saw it as another attempt at colonial assimilation, promoting the elimination of 'Indian' status, dissolution of Indigenous rights, and the privatization of reserve lands (Ibid, p. 119).

"Aboriginal peoples disagreed with Canada's desire to slip away from treaty obligations and responded by organizing in unprecedented ways" (p. 260). The Yukon Native Brotherhood was formed in 1968, and in 1972 prepared a document of grievances, *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow: A Statement of Grievances and an Approach to the Settlement by the Yukon Indian People*, which was presented to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau the following year (Ibid).[17] The document called for, among other things, a "freeze on development of all unoccupied crown lands" until land claims could be settled (qtd. in Ibid, p. 260).

Land claims in Yukon Territory were also moved forward by resistance to proposed industrial development projects. Concerns about the impact of development on the lands and livelihoods of local peoples came to a head in the mid-1970s with the widespread opposition to the proposed Mackenzie Valley Pipeline. The MacKenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry received input from 300 experts and held consultation in 35 northern communities (Berger, 1977, p. vii), relying heavily on the views and opinions of the North's Indigenous population for the first time (Bowie, 2013). In his final report, *Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland,* Justice Thomas Berger concluded that the pipeline should be delayed "pending the settlement of Aboriginal land claims" (Martin, 2011, p. 278). The Inuvialuit, whose homeland covers Yukon's North Slope and whose territory the pipeline would most directly impact, then began land claims negotiations with federal officials. These negotiations, though far from perfect, provided the Inuvialuit space to express their specific concerns over resource development and protected areas such as parks, setting the stage for negotiations between First Nations and the state in years to come (Martin, 2011). The Final Agreement signed between the Inuvialuit and the Government

[17] Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow was presented to Trudeau in Ottawa in February, 1973. Just two weeks earlier, the Supreme Court of Canada had released its decision in *Calder v. British Columbia (Attorney General)*, which, although ruling against Frank Calder and the Nisga'a, "was the first court case to recognize Aboriginal title of the land at the Supreme Court level" (Monchalin, 2016, p. 203).

of Canada in 1984 became the first comprehensive land claim signed in the territorial North (Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, 2007).

Despite the efforts of the Yukon Native Brotherhood in the early 1970s, it was only after twenty years of negotiations and rejected agreements that the Umbrella Final Agreement (UFA) was finally signed in 1993 (Council of Yukon First Nations, 2007). The UFA is not a legal document in itself but "provides a framework for Yukon First Nations and Governments in their negotiations to conclude Yukon First Nations Final Agreements" (Council of Yukon First Nations, 1997, p. 4). Using the UFA as a guide, First Nations in Yukon negotiated independent Final Agreements that would address their own specific needs. First Nations Final Agreements removed Yukon First Nations from the *Indian Act*-derived band structure applied by the federal government to Indigenous peoples across Canada and established a process for First Nations to interact with Canada and Yukon Territory on a government to government basis (Yukon Government, 2016).

Self-governing Yukon First Nations hold a level of political autonomy that some argue is unparalleled among Indigenous peoples in Canada (Slowey, 2015). But the impacts of colonialism are enduring throughout the territory and most, if not all, First Nations peoples in Yukon face colonial legacies every day. Furthermore, the land itself has undergone many changes throughout the colonial period. From the environmental transformation left by over a century of mining to the ways that Yukon has become imagined as a frontier or a wilderness, the landscape of Yukon Territory has also been shaped by these complex and ongoing processes of colonial territorialization.

The Peel Watershed has been constructed as a vast, un-peopled space, construed by conservation groups as a reason for environmental protection and by industry as a reason for development. But critical examinations of territory and the process of territorialization reveal that all space is shaped by processes of power. First Nations' connections to the Peel Watershed were

challenged or severed by the arrival of newcomers and their economies, governance models, and administrative policies; and the watershed, used, occupied, and transformed by First Nations since time immemorial, became, very recently, a largely unoccupied landscape. While newcomers re-territorialized the Peel Watershed through their own experiences and understandings, the Peel is now being territorialized in new ways, as First Nations reassert their connection to the watershed through land claims, the land use planning process, and ongoing cultural revitalization initiatives.

Examining processes of colonial territorialization

As critical histories, deconstructions of the concept of wilderness, and critiques of the concept of *terra nullius* have shown, early settlers in no way encountered a blank, empty, or natural landscape in the Peel Watershed, Yukon Territory, or anywhere in North America (Cronon, 1996; Spence, 1999; Cruikshank, 2005, Peepre & Locke, 2008; Dent, 2013). Rather, they encountered many peoples, diverse languages and cultures, and a landscape transformed by millennia of occupation. Indigenous peoples had territorialized and re-territorialized the Peel Watershed and Yukon Territory many times over before colonialism arrived with the first traders, missionaries, and settlers. This section builds upon the brief history offered in the last section to further examine how colonial processes of territorialization worked to turn the Peel Watershed from a First Nations homeland into a largely unoccupied and supposedly pristine landscape throughout the colonial period.

Two processes of territorialization can be identified in the Peel Watershed during the colonial period, which transformed the watershed from a landscape used, travelled on, and occupied by First Nations peoples to one that appeared to many as ‘empty’ and ‘pristine’, a resource frontier or a wilderness. First, as scholars writing on Yukon Territory have noted, the arrival of newcomers, along

with their diseases, technologies, religion, and economies, all worked to reshape territory in the Peel Watershed and across Yukon through the restructuring of traditional livelihood patters (Coates, 1991; Nadasdy, 2003, 2012; Cruikshank, 1990, 2005; Peepre & Locke, 2008; Neufeld, 2011). Over the course of the late-nineteenth and twentieth century, First Nations peoples increasingly shifted from land-based lifestyles and seasonal migratory patterns to living in communities and engaging in wage-based economies (Locke & Peepre, 2008). Non-state actors such as traders, missionaries, miners, and resource-based economies both directly and indirectly asserted "control over territory, resources, and people" in the Peel Watershed and across Yukon Territory (Neumann, 2004, p. 202). This process of non-state territorialization altered the connection of First Nations to traditional practices and livelihoods, trade networks and seasonal movement, and, of course, the land itself.

The second process of territorialization in the Peel Watershed can be identified in the increased presence of the Canadian state in Yukon Territory from the mid-twentieth century to the present. Building upon earlier processes of territorialization, the federal government further removed and disconnected First Nations from the Peel Watershed through economic, social, and political administration and control. Like Indigenous peoples across Canada, First Nations in Yukon Territory and the Peel Watershed were subject to an ever-increasing state presence (Coates, 1991). Following nation-wide policies of assimilation, Indian agents, federal officials, and the residential school system all worked to regulate or eliminate First Nations traditional livelihood practices, language, and culture, and replace them with those that aligned with Canadian settler society (Coates, 1991; Nadasdy, 2003; Neufeld, 2011). Contemporary state bordering practices, such as Yukon Government's creation of the Peel Watershed as a boundary for land use planning, are now beginning to reflect more of the ways that First Nations peoples see the land, in this case as a network of waterways (First Nations Interview #10); but as interview participants noted, the state continues to impose Euro-Canadian models of ownership,

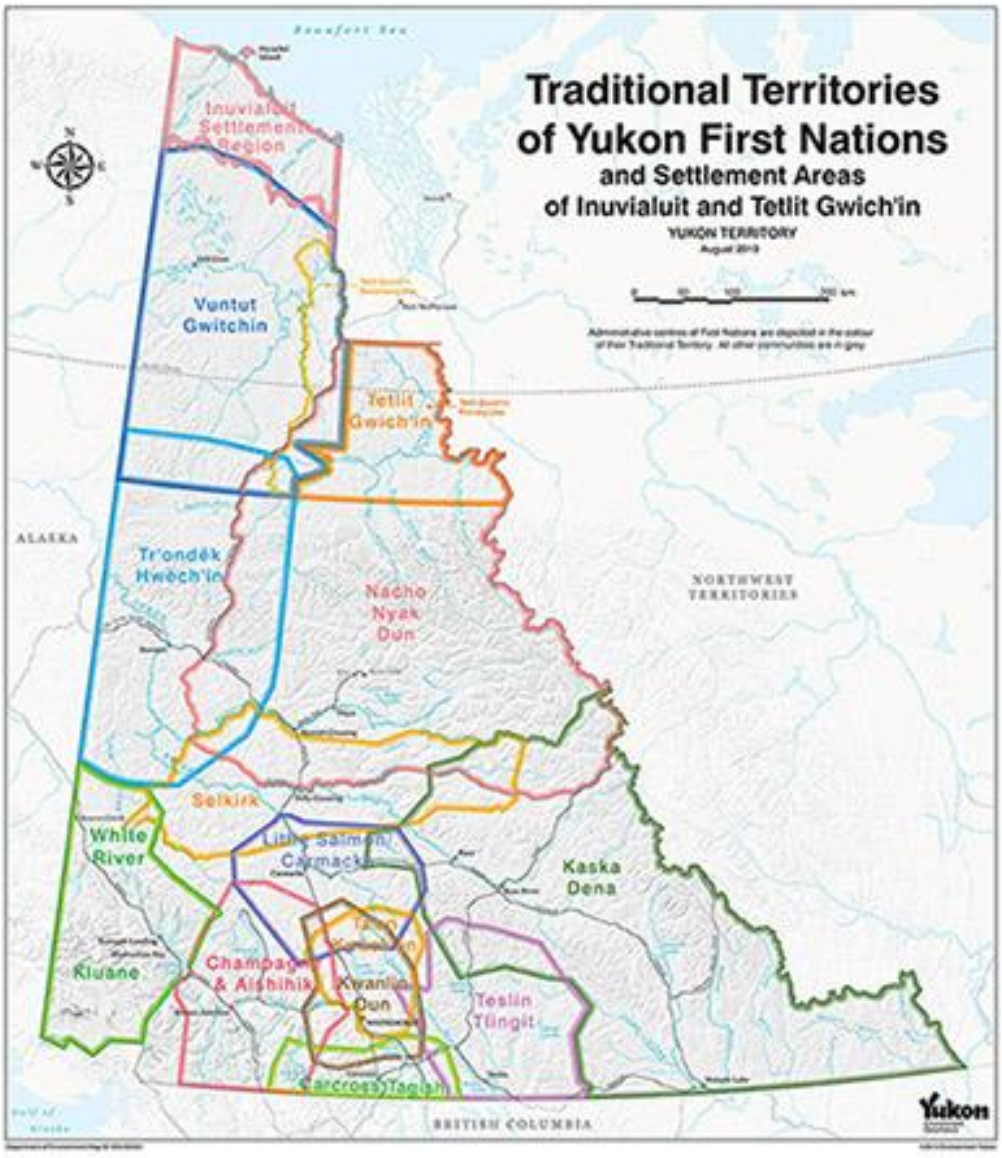
control, and management upon First Nations, exerting many of the state territorializing practices characteristic of the colonial period (First Nations Interview #5, #9, #10, #11).

Both state and non-state actors territorialized the Peel Watershed during the colonial period. First Nations peoples and communities throughout the Peel region faced and endured decades of social challenges brought on by regulatory policies, new economies, and a decreased amount of time spent on the land and away from volatile communities (Peepre & Locke, 2008). Traders, miners, settlers, government agents, scientists, and surveyors de-territorialized the Peel Watershed through various colonial policies and practices and re-territorialized the Peel as a resource frontier and/or an 'empty wilderness'. This is not to say that First Nations' connections to, and knowledge, of the Peel Watershed were erased entirely, but that they were severely impacted. The territory, its peoples, and their important connection, were reshaped, or re-territorialized, through this process. And it is only in recent years, as I will discuss later, that First Nations have begun to re-territorialize the Peel Watershed again.

The ways that Yukon First Nations understand, connect to, and shape territory in the present day are complicated by legacies of colonialism and the deceptive language of 'traditional territory' (Nadasdy, 2012). As Nadasdy (2012) notes, when First Nations began negotiating individual self-government agreements following the 1993 Umbrella Final Agreement, the configuration of the fourteen individual First Nations was modeled on the territorial boundaries of colonial administrative bands (Nadasdy, 2012). The way that 'traditional territory' appears in First Nations Final Agreements, as well as in land use planning, has led many to believe that the current organization of First Nations in Yukon – complete with a Chief and Council, distinct departments, and administrative boundaries – reflects the ways that First Nations people organized themselves before contact. As a Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in employee explained, many community leaders today believe that the formulation of Yukon's fourteen First Nations reflects traditional organization; yet for some living elders, not only do they remember a

time when fourteen First Nations in Yukon Territory did not exist, but they would never conceive of such a rigid distinction (First Nations Interview #9). For many people, she stated,

> When they hear the word traditional, they think of that as having thousands of years of validity or whatever. And it's like, no, no, that boundary exists because in the 1960s when land-claims started, some guy in Ottawa told your Chief, elected under Department of Indian Affairs, to get a bunch of people together and draw on the map the places that were important to them. And that became your traditional territory (First Nations Interview #9).



Map 4: Yukon First Nations 'traditional' territory. As Nadasdy (2012) notes, these territories are not in fact traditional, but products of federal government administration; even with the territorial overlap, they imply a much more rigid distinction between peoples than would have been the case.

The use of 'traditional territory' in Yukon has led many to think this way. As this quote acknowledges, the pressure to model First Nations governments and territory on Euro-Canadian conceptions of political boundaries and government structure has not only determined the territory to which First Nations have control over, but resulted in misunderstandings among some First Nations peoples about their own history and connection to places and peoples outside of this bounded space.

The construction of the Peel Watershed as a 'wilderness' must also be seen as a product of colonial territorializing processes in which First Nations peoples, over many decades, increasingly moved off the land and away from land-based lifestyles and into central communities and the wage economies of settler society. The invocations of 'wilderness' in the Peel Watershed, and what these invocations mean for land use planning, conservation, and First Nations reconnection to traditional territories, will be explored in greater detail in chapter 4. But it should be noted here that contemporary understandings of the watershed as "one of the largest intact and unsettled wild places left on Earth" (Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, 2015), or a "vast wilderness … [w]ith only limited human disturbance" (Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Yukon Chapter, 2017), cannot arise without the territorializing processes that led to this fundamental physical, cultural, and economic shift. As Neumann (2004) states, "[b]oth wilderness and concentrated settlement are products of a single process, the creation of the modern territorial state" (p. 212). In Yukon Territory, the modern distribution of communities, populations, and so-called 'wilderness' must be understood as an outcome of twentieth century state-making processes as well as the longer history of colonialism and colonial territorialization in the North.

The ways that the Peel Watershed and First Nations peoples in the Peel region have been controlled, bounded, and imbued with meaning over the colonial period have profoundly shaped the watershed, First Nations, and the relationship between the two today. As I will examine in the following

section, newly self-governing First Nations in the Peel Watershed must contend with legacies of colonialism in the present day, as they work to move their governments forward, participate in land use planning, and integrate traditional knowledge and values into contemporary decision making processes. And only by putting contemporary challenges in a colonial context can we begin to explore the important process of re-territorialization now underway in the Peel Watershed.

Colonial legacies and ongoing processes of colonial territorializaton

The challenges faced by contemporary Yukon First Nations should not be understated. First Nations are governments, and as such they must work to promote the health and well-being of their citizens, culturally, socially, and economically. The challenges presented to First Nations governments illustrate both the legacies left by colonialism as well as the ways that First Nations are using their political autonomy to move towards a more self-determined future. And while the successes and growth of Yukon First Nations should also not be understated and will be elaborated on in the following section's examination of First Nations re-territorialization of the Peel Watershed, I believe that it is first necessary to point to the ways that contemporary processes of colonial territorialization continue to disconnect First Nations peoples from the land, traditional knowledge, and culture while asserting Euro-Canadian models of government and governance. Through this critical examination, drawn from empirical data shared by interview participants, I will show how First Nations involvement in, and relationship to, land use planning and conservation in the Peel Watershed must be considered in the context of these contemporary colonial processes.

As many scholarly works have explored, the traditional knowledge of Indigenous peoples across the planet arises through "equal, interconnected, [and] mutually dependent" relationships with the

world (Monchalin, 2016, p. 27; others, to name only a few, include Berkes, 1999; Nadasdy, 1999, 2003; Ingold, 2000; Roberts, 2012; Johnson, 2012). Some have called this type of knowledge 'circular thinking' due to its acknowledgement of links and connections between all things, human and non-human (Monchalin, 2016, p. 27). As Berkes (1999) suggests, traditional knowledge is usually embedded in and attached to local culture, non-instrumental, based on respect and reciprocity, and adaptive; and often it is contrasted to 'western' knowledge and 'linear thinking', which is instrumental, reductionist, supposedly objective, detached, and characterized by dualisms between nature and culture, subject and object, and mind and body. As one interview participant stated, "First Nations do not work by squares but we work by river systems and animal migrations. This is our connection" (First Nations Interview #4).

First Nations traditional knowledge in Yukon Territory is directly connected to experiences on and with the land. But the reality of First Nations contemporary connection to the land is shaped by the complex and destructive legacies of colonialism, of which the most disastrous was the residential school system. While Coates (1991) notes that church-run day schools operated across Yukon[18] beginning in the early years of the twentieth century, it was the Anglican boarding school at Carcross and, later, the Catholic boarding school at Lower Post (south of Watson Lake) that had profoundly negative effects on First Nations children, families, communities, language, and culture. Like residential schools across Canada, the Carcross Residential School, which operated from 1911 to 1968, and the Lower Post Residential School, which operated from 1949 to 1975, provided children with poor living conditions, assimilatory and vocational education, little contact with their families or opportunities to return home (even at their parents insistence), and violent mistreatment (Ibid).[19]

[18] Church-run day schools operated in Moosehide, Fort Selkirk, Champagne, Teslin, Whitehorse, Little Salmon, Old Crow, Ross River, and Carmacks; some were only open a few months a year (Coates, 1991).
[19] Children as far away as Old Crow attended the Carcross Residential School (Coates, 1991), while Gwich'in children in Fort McPerson, NWT attended the boarding school in Aklavik (First Nations Interview #8).

Although residential school was phased out in Yukon in the 1960s and 1970s,[20] large portions of the First Nations adult population over the age of 50 attended some form of boarding school, while people of all ages endure the impacts. Nadasdy (2003) discusses a cultural rift between those who attended residential school and the older generation who did not, with knowledge no longer passed down in the same way that is was. These challenges were made evident during my time in Yukon Territory, and as many interview participants expressed, there is an ever-decreasing number of Elders who are old enough to have not attended residential school and who experienced at least some part of their life on the land.

The division between those educated at residential school and those old enough to have spent parts of their life living off the land can become stark when it comes to making decisions about the land. The disconnection between the vision of the Yukon Government and the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Government and that of Elders was expressed by one TH Elder in the way that both governments managed the land and its 'resources': "The wolf and the caribou live together. They been together, they say, before ice age. That's a long time. And they know what to do. And we try to play God out there to Mother Earth in the country" (First Nations Interview #5).

For this Elder and others, knowledge comes from experience on the land and it is transferred through stories (First Nations Interview #2, #5, #7, #8). This Elder recalled a winter he had spent on the land as a young man, mentioning that while stopping over in the village of Old Crow he went to visit the old people to hear their stories (First Nations Interview #5). Stories transfer knowledge and illustrate connections; connections many believe are lost in the treatment of land and 'resources' as objects to be studied, controlled, and managed by 'experts' acting outside of the places their work pertains to. This

[20]Despite decades of First Nations criticism of residential schools in Yukon, it was not until non-First Nations people began to speak up against the residential school system that the Carcross Residential School finally closed in 1968 (Coates, 1991).

Elder's confusion and frustration, as I discussed later with younger TH government employees, seemed to arise from his experiences as a young man, when the knowledge and advice of Elders was listened to and followed. Where traditional knowledge holders were once highly valued members of the community, this knowledge is not only disappearing – as the number of Elders who speak their language, grew up on the land, and did not attend residential school decreases – but is being pushed aside due to its inability to fit into a knowledge framework that is "quantitative, analytical, reductionist, and literate" (Nadasdy, 1999, p. 2).

The incorporation of traditional knowledge into the Euro-Canadian knowledge framework and the power relations that prevail in such attempts has been explored in scholarship on Yukon Territory and elsewhere (Berkes, 1999; Nadasdy, 1999, 2003; Cruikshank, 2005; Bowie, 2013). Cruikshank (2005) questions the systematizing of knowledge that the incorporation of traditional knowledge tends to promote, which she believes "sets in motion processes that fracture and fragment human experience" (p. 256). This systemizing through fragmentation works to inevitably "deny varieties of local knowledge their own histories" by denying their complexity (Ibid, p. 257). Similarly, Nadasdy (1999) argues that complex systems of Indigenous knowledge cannot be adequately translated into the Euro-Canadian knowledge framework. Attempting to do so not only simplifies and compartmentalizes Indigenous ways of seeing the world, but also reinforces colonial relations of power by reducing, manipulating, and selectively choosing traditional knowledge to serve the needs of the dominant structure (Ibid). Even when Indigenous peoples assert their connection to the land and their knowledge derived from that connection, processes that question, simplify, or dismiss that knowledge also work to challenge that connection. And when the knowledge of Elders, who have gained that knowledge through direct connection to the land, is ignored or dismissed, it is done so through the privileging of the knowledge framework and governance model that severed First Nations connections to the land in the first place.

Coming out of the Umbrella Final Agreement (UFA), signed in 1993 between Canada, Yukon Territory, and the Council for Yukon Indians, land use planning in Yukon Territory emerged as a process "intended to manage how settlement and non-settlement lands should be used by different stakeholders in order to minimize conflicts between them" (p. 143). There are currently eight planning regions in Yukon Territory, overseen by the Land Use Planning Council, but only one land use plan – the North Yukon Plan in Vuntut Gwitchin traditional territory – has "been approved and is being implemented" (Ibid, p. 144). The Peel Plan remains the only other completed plan (Yukon Land Use Planning Council, 2015).

The Peel Watershed Planning Commission (PWPC), established by the territory-wide Land Use Planning Council, included representation from each First Nation with traditional territory in the Peel Watershed. The Commission received input from across Yukon and beyond, drafted multiple versions of a plan, and attempted to gather traditional and local knowledge and incorporate it into the planning process and the *Final Recommended Plan* (Yukon Land Use Planning Council, 2015). But the frustrations expressed by those who did participate in the planning process reveal many of the identified challenges of incorporating traditional knowledge into an inherently linear process.[21] Challenges in the planning process also point to inherent problems in planning in Yukon Territory specifically, where First Nations Final Agreements were interpreted in contradictory ways, resulting in the Yukon Government's failure to adequately participate in the planning process, as well as its ultimate rejection of, and modifications to,

[21] The Peel Watershed Planning Commission consisted of a Chairman, Vice-Chairman, and a representative of each of the three Yukon First Nations and one Northwest Territories First Nation with traditional territory in the watershed. The Commission worked with all four First Nations governments, and held "public consultation with the public, stakeholders, and the Parties on the various Scenarios" being proposed (Gryzbowski, 2014, p. 18). Gryzbowski identifies challenges in the consultation process such as the Commission not spending enough time in the affected communities, the presence of technical knowledge not understood by all, and an absence of clear and topic-specific feedback. In literature, public statements, and interviews, many expressed that both the Yukon Government's and the mining industry's engagement in the process was minimal.

the *Final Recommended Plan* (Staples et al., 2013; Gryzbowski, 2014; YCS Interview #2). As one interview participant stated,

> [Yukon Government] didn't engage in a very high level, serious way during the Peel and the Dawson land-use planning process … I just don't think they really got how important the land use planning process is in the context of the constitutional makeup of the Yukon regarding the First Nations Final Agreements. …When the First Nations in the Yukon signed their Final Agreements they gave up Aboriginal title to their traditional territories in return for a bunch of different things. And one of the things they gave it up in return for was an equal say in how land use planning would take place. And the Yukon Government doesn't get that. They think, well okay, they signed their Final Agreements, there's settlement land and then there's Crown land. And the Yukon Government says, well, we need to have complete control over the Crown land and the First Nations, they can have control over their settlement land (YCS Interview #2).

Whether the Yukon Government's minimal participation in the process, rejection of the *Final Recommended Plan*, and release of their own plan was a result of a misinterpretation of the Final Agreements or an intentional attempt to ignore or assert political power over Yukon First Nations will probably remain unclear. But in either case, the failures of the Peel Watershed planning process point to ongoing struggles of First Nations to have their knowledge, connections to the land, and land claims agreements acknowledged and upheld in the decision making process.

In identifying the problems of the Peel Watershed land use planning process, some pointed to what they believed was the Yukon Government's attempt to fast-track development projects by simplifying the decision-making process; others expressed frustration with the government's consistent inability to step outside a linear, Euro-Canadian conceptual framework that saw the land as something to be managed (First Nations Interview #9, #10; YCS Interview #2; Tourism Interview #5; Environmental Activist/Artist Interview #2). As one Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in employee stated,

> I think in their minds, what they were going to end up with was this thing that said, 'okay, we get all that, we'll set that aside. This is the land where we have free game. This is where we can do all the things we want to do, get away from other processes and this and that, right?' And so, the problem there is that it's really hard for us to participate in that because we would just never even consider looking at the land that way (First Nations Interview #9).

Speaking to the conflicts that tend to arise in the attempts of planning processes to incorporate traditional knowledge (TK), the same participant went on to state,

> They ask us for this TK as though we have this little set of info that we can give them … black and white info that is written on a piece of paper. But it's like, the entire nature of it, which is the entire nature of the land, is that it changes every single day. And your response to it changes every single day depending on what your priorities and needs are, right. So how can you possibly write a plan for that? You can't (First Nations Interview #9).

Another TH employee elaborated on the continued privileging of a linear, Euro-Canadian knowledge framework that is ultimately incompatible with First Nations perspectives of the land:

> That's what they really wanted to do, it seemed. You know, 'where is something important culturally so that we can wrap a land management unit or a special management area around that and put some kind of level of protection or not?' It's very black and white in terms of the way they want to present things because the whole purpose, from their view, is to limit land-use conflicts or allow mining or not allow something else. It seemed like that was the way they were going instead of saying, 'we've got these multiple values on the landscape, how can we work to ensure they all happen in an appropriate way?' (First Nations Interview #10).

The frustrations expressed by participants with a planning process that tried to categorize value and compartmentalize land-use illustrates some of the challenges presented to contemporary First Nations. The need to incorporate multiple values on the land, multiple uses of the land, and adapt to changes that inevitably occur over time is disregarded, simplified, or dismissed when they cannot fit into the dominant linear, Euro-Canadian governance model. Moreover, the power dynamics between those who are providing knowledge – Elders and other community members – and those who are assembling, assigning value to, and writing into policy this knowledge – government officials, scientists, and land use planners – continues to represent, for many, a colonial relationship. A land use planning process that continues to privilege the knowledge of outside 'experts' and government representatives over local peoples cannot meaningfully engage or incorporate traditional knowledge or local understandings of, and connection to, place. As a frustrated TH employee expressed,

> If you went down to Whitehorse and went to the government office there and said, 'what are you going to do for a land-use plan?', they'll send you a biologist, they're going to send you a … I don't know, name five. I can't even think of them now. So it's kind of like trying to put a land use plan together by bringing someone up from LA, giving them a map in an office … no, don't even fly them up; just send the map to LA, tell them to pick 80% of the land that they think should be protected and then leave it at that (First Nations Interview #9).

Here, 'expert' knowledge, even if it lacks direct understanding of, or connection to, the land that is being managed, prevails over the embedded knowledge of those who have spent years in close connection to the land. Traditional knowledge, if it is to exist at all, must be valued and incorporated by 'experts' who, in attempting to integrate holistic understandings into a specialized framework, often remove knowledge from its social context (Berkes, 1999; Nadasdy, 1999; Cruikshank, 2005). By attempting to manage the land by establishing disconnected and bounded land use areas (protected areas, mining areas, heritage areas, etc.) using the knowledge of outside 'experts', First Nations understandings of the land as an ever-changing and interconnected system are dismissed. And as this First Nations traditional knowledge continues to be ignored, distilled, or misinterpreted, the process of colonial territorialization continues, as the land itself continues to be shaped by the knowledge of the colonizer.

Like the incorporation of traditional knowledge into land use planning processes, First Nations governance is also challenged by the enduring legacies of colonialism. As Dacks (2004) notes, obvious challenges to self-governing First Nations present themselves in the form of population size and a resulting lack of trained and experienced staff.[22] But First Nations governments also find themselves having to prove to Yukon and Canada that they possess the 'capacity' required to govern themselves. Ultimately, they must do so by emulating the structures of government and the capacity for governance that reflect the territorial and federal governments.

[22] First Nations in Yukon Territory range in size from around 100 to 1100, though of that number, many are likely to be living outside the community, or settlement lands (Dacks, 2004).

As Natcher & Davis (2007) illustrate, Yukon First Nations must fill newly created government positions in small nations with few individuals who possess the technical knowledge that the territorial and federal governments expect before any level of authority is transferred to the First Nation. In departments such as natural resource management, non-First Nations staff who have the required "familiar[ity] with the bureaucratic and technical complexity of contemporary resource management" are brought in, either permanently or temporarily, until members of the First Nation can be trained to the required level of expertise (Ibid, p. 274). As Nadasdy (2012) notes, this not only keeps the power in the hands of colonial governments, as it is up to them to determine when capacity is achieved, but perpetuates the privileging of Euro-Canadian knowledge and 'expertise', as well as the entire government structure.

As some scholarship has argued (Nadasdy, 2002, 2012; Dacks, 2004; Natcher & Davis, 2007), the structure of First Nations' governments, as well as day-to-day operations, are in many ways a result of years of colonialism and the attempt to assimilate First Nations peoples into settler society through education, the wage economy, and the suppression of traditional practices and culture. Nadasdy (2012) states that self-governing First Nations in Yukon Territory are both "a legacy of colonial rule" and the federal government's desire to incorporate Indigenous peoples into the state as well as "a resistance to colonial incorporation, a result of thirty years of struggle and compromise" (p. 506). Reflecting the challenges of operating a First Nations government within a Euro-Canadian governance framework, one Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in employee passionately stated:

> What do you do? Like, what are you supposed to do? And constantly, while you're doing all of this, you have to participate in this process with, you know, 10% of the level of human capacity that the other governments have and your work is tripled because you're also trying to educate them as you go along. And you're trying to educate people who are so closed to the idea that there's even another way of doing things. It's just, it's such an uphill … and at the time you're thinking, 'here I am spending all of my time doing this. I should be in that school. I should be out … Percy (an Elder) should be out with his grandkids'. He's 89 years old and spending all of his

> time working in the TH government offices. He's put his time in, you know, and if we really want to strengthen the community, those Elders should not be coming in here interviewing with government people. They should be out there doing the stuff with their kids (First Nations Interview #9).

The contradictions in working in a government office and participating in a Euro-Canadian government structure in order to implement laws that have been drawn from direct connections to, and knowledge of, the land represent the ever-present reality for Yukon First Nations. The division between those whose knowledge comes from a lifetime spent on the land and those who have been educated in Canadian schools and hold positions of power in government offices reflects what Nadasdy (1999) calls "the bureaucratization of the younger generation" (p. 13). While the increase in knowledge that does not come from a direct connection to the land does not necessarily nullify the knowledge that does, the ways that 'western' knowledge, Euro-Canadian government structure, and the very government office working environment are privileged over traditional knowledge, First Nations connections to the land, and experiences on the land continues to present obstacles to the retention and revitalization of First Nations traditional knowledge, practices, and culture.

First Nations self-government in Yukon Territory was long awaited, and as Slowey (2009) notes, has provided First Nations with "greater economic control over land and resources" within their territory and helped to "ensure the retention and affirmation of their culture" (p. 231). Bowie (2013) reiterates this by stating that Indigenous leaders across Canada saw land claims as a "means to protect a variety of interests, including safeguarding the continuance of traditional ways of life and ensuring that First Nations benefited from industrial activities affecting their homelands" (p. 101). Yukon First Nations can and do wield their newly acquired political power in ways that they have been previously unable to; ways that benefit local communities and local economies while holding onto traditional values and a connection to the land. But the structure of government, like the structure of land use planning, further challenges First Nations knowledge and connections to the land by both physically regulating

connections to the land through a government structure that requires them to be in an office rather than out on the land, and by questioning, simplifying, and distilling the knowledge derived from that very connection.

Yukon First Nations entered land claims agreements to take back some of the power that they have been deprived of for over a century. But as a Vuntut Gwitchin citizen and employee noted, while land claims did bring about a new era of First Nations political and cultural autonomy in Yukon Territory, the Umbrella Final Agreement, like numerous treaties before it, also came with a loss of territory:

> With every document [that Indigenous peoples have] signed [in Canada], we've only lost more land and more rights ... In 1993 when we signed our Final Agreement, we sacrificed land; we gave up land to have governance over one little chunk, again losing more land (First Nations Interview #4).

For centuries, colonization in Canada has been characterized by Indigenous peoples losing land. Generations of settlers occupied, used, and controlled Indigenous lands, invoking Eurocentric conceptions of property, development, and progress to justify their actions. Government after government signed treaties, transferring Indigenous lands to settler society, and went on to break these treaties, again and again. And resource economies, from forestry to fishing to mineral, oil, and gas extraction, have continuously imposed upon Indigenous lands without consent, polluting and transforming the waters, lands, and species upon them. This process continues today (Saul, 2014; Coultard, 2014; Monchalin, 2016).

When Indigenous peoples responded to this ongoing colonial process by acquiring a level of power over their territory, as Yukon First Nations accomplished through land claims and their Final Agreements, colonial processes of territorialization continued, and still continue, to find new ways to dispossess Indigenous peoples of land and restrict their control over territory. In Yukon, this is accomplished through the colonial process of disconnecting First Nations from knowledge, language,

and culture when it cannot be accomplished by way of the land itself. First Nations Final Agreements have undoubtedly begun the long process of turning the tides of colonialism. But as ongoing processes of colonial territorialization, inadequate consultation processes, and the Yukon Government's ignorance of First Nations Final Agreements and minimal participation in the land use planning process reveal, the colonial processes that challenge First Nations' access to, and control over, their own territory have not yet disappeared.

And yet, some First Nations have found ways to begin to transcend some of the characteristics of the Euro-Canadian government structure from which they arose, increase their connection to the land, traditional knowledge, language, and culture, and continue to challenge colonial processes that reaffirm colonial power relations. Through extensive work with Elders and ambitious programs to help revitalize culture, such as language programs, hunt camps, and cultural festivals and gatherings, First Nations attempt to balance tradition with contemporary needs. As First Nations mature, some First Nations governments are beginning to think about how they might become, as one Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in employee stated, "more First Nations-like," moving away from the Euro-Canadian government structure on which they were modeled "to embrace legislation, policies, and governmental structure that is more congruent with First Nations values" (First Nations Interview #10). Fundamentally, the realization of that transition requires both a reflection on the colonial processes that shaped First Nations peoples and First Nations in Yukon Territory as well as an effort to reconnect to traditional knowledge, culture, and, of course, the land itself.

First Nations reconnection to, and re-territorialization of, the Peel Watershed

Like all Yukon First Nations, the four First Nations of the Peel Watershed are shaped by processes of colonialism and colonial territorialization. Some of their employees attended residential school; their territories and government reflect Euro-Canadian models; and their engagement in decision-making for their territory follows the political processes of Euro-Canadian governments, such as land use planning and natural resource management. Yet through the land use planning process and the sharing of traditional knowledge about the Peel Watershed, First Nations peoples have been able to reconnect to the watershed and each other, reassert their strong and enduring relationship to the Peel, and re-territorialize the watershed in the process. As I have illustrated throughout this chapter, the ways that colonial processes have shaped First Nations and First Nations peoples in the Peel Watershed are complex and ongoing. But recent First Nations responses to those legacies deserve consideration, both for the ways that they indicate a new level of First Nations political, social, cultural, and economic power in Yukon Territory, but also for the ways that they have shaped, and continues to shape, the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement.

As interview participants emphasized, it is only in the very recent history that people have not lived in the Peel Watershed (Tourism Interview #1; First Nations Interview #9). In interviews, First Nations participants spoke of the Peel Watershed in ways that reflect historic connections and challenge the construction of the watershed as empty. Participants spoke of familial connections with other First Nations, sometimes across vast distances and into modern-day Northwest Territories or Alaska, challenging the political boundaries that came with colonialism and First Nations land claims. One respondent who grew up in and around Fort McPherson and now lives in Old Crow spoke of a recently discovered connection on her mother's side to the territory around the Blackstone River north of Dawson, and happily told of a recent visit to this land (First Nations Interview #8). In both interviews and

casual discussions in Mayo, Yukon and Fort McPherson, Northwest Territories, Elders spoke of the historic winter route that connected their communities, separated by many days of travel by dog-team and later snowmobile. Traditional routes connecting the Tetlit Gwich'in at the mouth of the Peel River to the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in in present-day Dawson were used by RCMP officers traveling from Fort McPherson to Dawson in the early twentieth century. It was on this 760-kilometre route in 1911 that the fabled *Lost Patrol* carried on without their Gwich'in guides and became lost and died before they could return to Fort McPherson (Peepre & Locke, 2008). Relaying only a few of the memories and stories participants shared about traditional camps, travel routes, and connections to the land and people reveal both the extent the Peel Watershed was used and occupied by Indigenous peoples until very recently as well as the relations between peoples across great distances that have only recently been constructed as distinct First Nations.

First Nations have asserted their connection to the Peel Watershed through the Peel Watershed Planning Commission, the court case appeal against Yukon Government's modifications to the *Final Recommended Plan*, and in general public awareness and education, all of which serve to reconnect First Nations people to the land and to one another in very real ways. In multiple interviews, young First Nations participants told of opportunities they had been given to go into the Peel Watershed, whether to a location considered important to ancestors or to travel down one of the rivers (First Nations Interview #3, #4). These individuals had not traveled to this area before but with the increasing awareness and effort to promote protection of the watershed were able to. In this way, the younger generation is taking opportunities to visit and connect to places used extensively by their ancestors and learn traditional skills there.

As will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 5, a recently established, month-long canoe trip for First Nations youth – *Youth for the Peel* – has further reconnected young First Nations peoples to the

territory of their ancestors. The trip takes the youth down one of the watershed's major rivers and teaches them about tradition, history, leadership, and backcountry travel (First Nations Interview #4). *Youth for the Peel* also hopes to enable some participants to gain the skills to become certified river guides so that they, and their communities, can benefit economically by taking tourists down the rivers and teaching them of the area's history and First Nations culture (First Nations Interview #4). Here, the intergenerational knowledge that is passed through experiences on the land, which was largely interrupted by the 'residential school gap', can begin to be mended. Moreover, the stories that define First Nations' connection to the Peel are transmitted to wider audiences so that both First Nations and non-First Nations peoples can begin to understand the Peel in new ways.

Recent concerns over the future of the Peel Watershed have also given Elders a reason to reconnect with the land and with each other. Opportunities to travel down the watershed's rivers with conservation groups, meet with members of other First Nations, share family stories and traditional knowledge, and visit or re-visit important sites have reconnected some with places they had known as children, visited infrequently, or merely heard about (Tourism Interview #5; CPAWS Interview #2; First Nations Interview #6, #7, #8). As one Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in employee stated,

> I think [the Peel land use planning process has] brought some of the First Nations back together again in the way that they would have been that has been more difficult since land claims, because land claims are quite divisive (First Nations Interview #9).

An Elder in Dawson elaborated on this reconnection through the Peel Watershed legal proceedings in Whitehorse:

> It's nice, that all First Nations go down, different First Nations go down to the court in Whitehorse, when [Thomas Berger] starts talking with the other lawyers and stuff like that … we all go to the courthouse. One here, another there … from different areas. But we all sit together. We know one another anyways (First Nations Interview #7).

First Nations continue to experience many challenges in their attempts to promote cultural revitalization and reconnect to traditional knowledge, practices, and places. Many First Nations peoples must spend a great deal of time working for the government to keep it moving forward, reducing the time that can be spent on the land or engaging in traditional activities (First Nations Interview #4, #9); others are engaged full-time in non-traditional employment such as mining. Yet First Nations are navigating these challenges, and in doing so are reasserting their connection to, and control over, land that, for most of the last century, has been defined, mapped, studied, managed, and bounded by outsiders.

The growth of settler society, the rise and expansion of extractive industries and resource development projects, and persistent settler-government administration have all served to reshape the Peel Watershed and re-determine who and what is included and excluded. Combined, these processes re-territorialized the Peel Watershed, transforming it from a First Nations homeland to what many believed to be a mining frontier or pristine wilderness. But as Lunstrum (2009) notes, territorialization is never an end-point; it is a process. And the ways that First Nations continue to use their land, practice traditional activities, and, following the signing of their Final Agreements, increasingly assert control over, and connection to, places they have known since time immemorial all serve to initiate a new process of territorialization in the Peel Watershed.

Conclusion

The arrival of settlers and their resource economies, bureaucratic management techniques and policies of assimilation, and, more recently, First Nations reconnection to traditional territory through cultural revitalization initiatives have all shaped the territory of the Peel Watershed. The relationship of both First Nations and non-First Nations peoples to the Peel Watershed today must be understood in

the context of the colonial developments that re-territorialized the region through the colonial period. Following the settlement of First Nations land claims and the increased participation of First Nations in decision making processes, the Peel Watershed is now being made in new ways, reflecting both the increased political autonomy of First Nations as well as the enduring legacies of colonization.

The arrival of settlers and new economies initially reshaped the way that Indigenous peoples in Yukon Territory and the Peel Watershed connected to land and to one another. The resource boom of the post-World War II era brought a renewed interest in the North and further challenged the lives and livelihoods of Indigenous peoples. Accompanying this renewed interest was a growth in federal government administrative policies that operated under the assimilatory goals of the *Indian Act*. Of the colonial processes that affected Indigenous peoples in Yukon Territory, residential school is considered among the most profound and has left lasting legacies on communities and peoples across the territory. The loss of language, the repression of cultural practices, the destruction of families and communities, and a severed connection to the land are among the various forms of cultural loss that resulted from the residential school system and other colonial processes. This cultural loss presents First Nations governments and their citizens with diverse and complex challenges in the present day.

The movement away from traditional, land-based livelihoods and towards the wage-based, settler economies of resource exploitation restructured First Nations societies in Yukon Territory and altered First Nations' connections to the Peel Watershed. The increased movement off the land and into towns and communities in the nineteenth and twentieth century also shaped, and continues to shape, the ways that non-First Nations people see and understand territory. While the Peel Watershed was once heavily occupied and used by Indigenous peoples in northern Yukon, the recent disruption of First Nations connections to this land has, in part, enabled it to be constructed as a 'pristine' and 'empty' wilderness and/or a mining frontier.

First Nations still face many challenges that can be traced to the legacies and ongoing processes of colonialism. The establishment and growth of First Nations governments, the true incorporation and valuing of local and traditional knowledge, and the active participation of First Nations peoples, along with their values and ontologies, in decision-making processes such as land use planning are all examples of challenges should not be understated; but neither should they be seen as impassable barriers. First Nations are finding new and creative ways to connect to the land, knowledge, and each other, all of which work to overcome destructive legacies left by the colonial period. First Nations across Yukon are actively moving forward and, as multiple interview participants acknowledge, are enabling Yukon's entire society to move forward with them (YCS Interview #2; Artist/Activist Interview #1, #2; First Nations Interview #3, #4).

The process of colonial territorialization has shaped conceptions of 'nature' and 'wilderness' in Yukon Territory and the Peel Watershed, as well as environmental conservation and the relationship between environmentalists and First Nations. As the following two analytical chapters will explore, conservation in Yukon Territory is rooted in colonialism and the settler-colonial relationship. But as First Nations reconnect to traditional culture, knowledge, and territory, non-First Nations' peoples, too, must find new ways to understand, experience, and connect to the Peel Watershed and Yukon Territory as a whole.

Chapter 4

‘A wilderness that is sacred to the First Nations’: Deconstructing and reconsidering the concept of wilderness in the Peel Watershed

Wilderness is “a term to which First Nations particularly object because it so thoroughly erases their prior occupancy.” – Cruikshank, 2005, p. 255

“[W]ilderness in the Yukon includes people and their traditional activities.” – Pojar, 2006, p. 21

“The Vuntut Gwitchin people have made it very clear to me and to the former leaders of our government that we have an obligation to protect this pristine wilderness, caribou habitat and ecosystems, as it is an essential element of our very existence as Gwich’in people across the North.”

– Chief Bruce Charlie, Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, Peel Gathering, June 2016

Introduction

The concept of wilderness arises out of particular ideas about land, nature, and the human place within it. In recent years, important critical scholarship, along with Indigenous voices and ontologies, has led to a questioning of the idea of wilderness, which identifies wilderness as a social construction that grows not from direct connections to the land but from the understanding that ‘nature’ is separate from human beings and ‘culture’. ‘Wilderness’, for critical deconstructionists, arises as a reaction to an increasingly industrialized society; one that has lost the purity, the emptiness, and the *wild*ness that is believed to precede the industrial age. Moreover and most critically, the concept of wilderness has been called racist for the ways that it constructs landscapes as unoccupied and unaffected by human beings, thereby erasing the historical and ongoing presence of Indigenous peoples.

The ways that the idea of wilderness has shaped the land, the lives, and the livelihoods of Indigenous peoples across Canada and around the world has not been lost on scholars, nor is it lost on Yukoners of both First Nations and non-First Nations descent. Throughout the twentieth century, settler constructions of parts of Yukon Territory as wilderness led to the creation of parks, the regulation of traditional practices, and the physical removal of First Nations peoples from territories that they had used and occupied for millennia (Nadasdy, 2003; Cruikshank, 2005; Neufeld, 2011; Martin, 2011).[23] And, as many have pointed out, not only do Yukon First Nations have no word for wilderness in their language, but the very idea that human beings can be separated from the non-human world contradicts their world view or ontology (Berkman, 2004; Cruikshank, 2005; Pojar, 2006).

In Yukon Territory, critiques of wilderness as a concept reflect broader debates occurring in academic scholarship, environmental conservation, and decolonization literature around the world. If wilderness is in fact a colonial and racist idea, which serves only to further oppress Indigenous peoples and their ontologies while perpetuating the Euro-Canadian nature-culture dichotomy, why not rid ourselves of the idea of wilderness altogether? And the answer for many is to do just that (Cronon, 1996; Callicott, 1991; 2008; Cruikshank, 2005). For many, environmental conservation in the twenty-first century means turning away from the concept of wilderness and acknowledging the peoples and processes that shape all places. But wilderness as a concept has not disappeared; rather, it has been reconsidered, redefined, and rearticulated. The concept of wilderness continues to be invoked in the Peel Watershed, in the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement, and in tourism, government, and everyday language in Yukon Territory. Yukoners of both First Nations and non-First Nations decent both use and criticize 'wilderness'. Yukon's small population and large amount of 'wild land' is celebrated, while words such as 'pristine' and 'empty' are lambasted for their erasure of First Nations presence; and

[23] This can most obviously be seen in the creation of Kluane National Park and Reserve, where First Nations peoples were expelled so that Euro-Canadian ideas of wilderness and wildlife management could be upheld and implemented (see Nadasdy, 2003 or Neufeld, 2011).

when ideas of emptiness or untouched nature are invoked, they are done so carefully, paradoxically, and strategically. The concept of wilderness has not disappeared in the Peel Watershed and Yukon Territory, but it calls for re-examination.

This chapter draws upon critical scholarship, analysis of the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement, and the perspectives expressed by Yukoners in interviews to examine the ways that the concept of wilderness is invoked in Yukon Territory, the Peel Watershed, and the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement. The ways that the concept is invoked in connection to the Peel Watershed reveal diverse, paradoxical, and culturally rooted understandings of 'nature', the non-human world, and the human relationship to it. By exploring the ways that the concept of wilderness is invoked in tourism, ecosystems ecology, spiritual and emotional connections to the natural world, and in First Nations expressions of home, I illustrate why any examination of the Peel Watershed must come with an examination of the concept of wilderness; and, likewise, why any exploration of the concept of wilderness must consider the ways that it is used in the Peel Watershed. The concept of wilderness continues to be invoked in the Peel Watershed, sometimes problematically, sometimes appropriately, but always contextually, rooted in a colonial past and living in a complex present.

The concept of wilderness and the wilderness debate

The concept of wilderness has received a great deal of critical attention since the 1990s. Once assumed to describe 'un-peopled' and relatively undeveloped landscapes, as the United States Wilderness Act of 1964 illustrates, scholars have since called the concept into question.[24] Important

[24] The most common definition of wilderness, as cited from the Wilderness Act, states: "A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain" (88th Congress, 1964, p. 1).

works point to the social constructions of wilderness as a dangerous place outside of society (Merchant, 1995; Cronon, 1996), as a sublime escape from the ills of modernity (Nash, 1979; Callicott, 1991; Cronon, 1996), as a primeval landscape (Cronon, 1996; Braun, 2002), as an elite sportsman's recreational space (Loo, 2001; Sandlos, 2003; Binnema & Niemi, 2006), and as a racist concept that excludes the historical and ongoing presence of Indigenous peoples (Callicott, 1991, 2008; Spence, 1999; Neumann, 2001; Loo, 2001; Braun, 2002; Binnema & Niemi, 2006; Todd, 2008; Sandlos, 2008; MacLaren, 2011; Lippai, 2014).

Debates over the concept of wilderness emerged in the 1990s with a proliferation of scholarly and literary work from the fields of history, geography, environmental philosophy, and others, though some critical works examining ideas of wilderness and nature did appear earlier (Nash, 1979; Williams, 1980; Evernden, 1999/1985). The centre-point of deconstructions of wilderness remains William Cronon's (1996) *The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature*. Cronon traces the concept of wilderness from the Bible to the Romantic period to frontier America to the contemporary environmental movement, which, he argues, constructs landscapes as the idealized other (i.e. wilderness) while devaluing the landscapes that human beings actually live in and call home. Cronon's work acts as a foundation on which a bitter debate around the idea of wilderness has been built. As Nelson & Callicott (2008) discuss, the critical deconstruction of wilderness has had lasting impacts in environmental conservation movements, which have been forced to reconsider their understandings of 'nature', and in political discussions around protected lands and development; some believe that works that point to wilderness and nature as socially constructed have set the environmental movement back decades.[25]

[25] Nelson & Callicott (2008) make reference to pro-industry/anti-environmental regulation politicians and spokespeople using interpretations of Cronon's work to suggest that no landscapes are without human impact and thus development should proceed unabated.

The modern idea of wilderness arose with the national parks system in the United States in the late-nineteenth century. Cronon (1996) reveals how the writings of transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau, the conservation efforts of eccentric writer and Sierra Club founder, John Muir, and the sport-hunting, frontiersman ethics of President Theodore Roosevelt coalesced to create the first national parks, all of which represented 'sublime' landscapes that acted as the antithesis to urban-industrial society. International examinations of 'wilderness' continue to show how the American model of conservation, known as the 'Yellowstone' or 'fortress' model, has imposed 'wilderness' on local peoples through the assumption that it must be bounded and un-peopled (Neumann, 2001; Dove, 2006; Paulston et. al, 2012). While in North America, critical histories illustrate the ways that the idea of wilderness was used to dispossess and dispel Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples from long-occupied lands through the creation of parks and state-owned 'public' lands,[26] and through the regulation of practices on these lands (Spence, 1999; Sandlos, 2003, 2008; Mawani, 2007; Dent, 2008; Easton, 2008; MacLaren, 2011; Craig-Dupont, 2011).

Some critical scholarship has drawn comparisons between the concept of wilderness and the Lockean concept of *terra nullius*, or 'empty land', which is considered to have aided colonial expansion in Canada and Australia through the construction of land as empty of human beings and thus open for settlement (Dent, 2008; Watson, 2014). Elsewhere, 'wilderness' has been critiqued for its perpetuation of the myth of the ecologically noble savage, which casts Indigenous peoples as the pre-modern other, contrasting Indigenous peoples, their culture, and their assumed 'wilderness' home to modernity and society (Spence, 1999; Nadasdy, 2005a; Mawani, 2007; MacLaren, 2011; De Bont, 2015). This characterization freezes Indigenous peoples in a pre-colonial time and continues to complicate

[26] Forest Service Land in the United States and Crown Land in Canada are considered 'public' lands, though Indigenous peoples and their traditional practices have a long history of exclusion from such lands. The claim of 'ownership' of these lands by the government represents, for many peoples, nothing short of theft; and the continued use and sale of these lands without consultation of the people that continue to live on and use them represents, for many, a continuation of colonialism (Saul, 2014; Monchalin, 2016).

Indigenous claims to elements of their culture through colonial constructions of authenticity and indigeneity (Braun, 2002; Nadasdy, 2005a).

A number of scholarly works have identified the ways that 'wilderness' is rooted in the dichotomy of nature and culture (Merchant, 1995; Cronon, 1996; Callicott, 1991; 2008; Braun, 2002). In both Biblical conceptions of wilderness as hostile, dangerous, and feared, as well as in Romantic constructions of wilderness as sublime, romantic, and pure, 'wilderness' lies outside of society; a place opposite the Garden of Eden, human inhabited lands, and industrial capitalism. With embedded dualities in mind, the exploration of gender in conceptions of nature and wilderness lies at the forefront of ecofeminist literature, and many have illustrated how the frontier and masculine narratives of adventure, domination, and conquest have become wrapped up with the wilderness imaginary (Merchant, 1995; Callicott, 1991; Cronon, 1996; Loo, 2001; 2006; Jarvis, 2007).

Though traced by some to the Bible and European religious thought, the separation of nature and culture gained widespread acceptance during the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment. As Merchant (1995) states, "Francis Bacon saw science and technology as the way to control nature" (p. 136), while the Cartesian separation of mind and body enabled the objectification of the natural world, in which the human studied, controlled, and managed through a rigid scientific process that relied upon dualistic thinking and a separation between subject and object (Evernden, 1999). In Western Europe and North America, the religiously-associated fears of wilderness turned into religious celebrations, as Romanticism constructed wild and unpopulated landscapes into religious temples "where one [could] escape an inauthentic modernity" and "glimpse the face of God" (Braun, 2002, p. 87). These celebrations led to increased depictions of 'wilderness' landscapes in writing, poetry, and art, and brought previously undesirable places into the fascinations of people in industrial society; wilderness became the place to escape the ills and drudgery of the urban environment, exercise contemporary

notions of manhood, and, following the removal of local populations, experience the bygone frontier (Cronon, 1996; Loo, 2001; Binnema & Niemi, 2006).

Critical deconstructions of wilderness have succeeded in forcing a rethinking of the concept and continue to influence contemporary understandings of the relationship between human beings and 'nature' in ever-unfolding ways. But the attempt to abolish the concept of wilderness has largely failed. The complex and diverse ways that human beings understand, encounter, and connect to 'nature' sustains the idea of wilderness and the wilderness debate. While critical analysis of wilderness has positively contributed to decolonizing settler conceptions of the land and the human relationship to it, the continued presence of the concept illustrates that the definition of wilderness and its implications are far from agreed upon. 'Wilderness' continues to hold the fascination of scholars, environmentalists, artists, and the general public; and more than two decades after Cronon's call, it continues to be rethought.

For those for whom the concept of wilderness retains value, it is considered to be where the non-human world reigns over the human world, where the human desire for control and management is absent, and where the impact of human beings is minimally felt (Snyder, 1974, 2000; Oelschlaeger, 1991; Strong, 1995; Nelson & Callicott, 1998, 2008; Griffiths, 2006; Jickling, 2009). Proponents of 'wilderness' draw from critical deconstructions an understanding that an idea of wilderness that writes Indigenous and local peoples out of place cannot be sustained; nor can a wilderness characterized by its opposition to the society that creates it be anything but contradictory. In the literature that upholds the concept of wilderness, it emerges through an ecological-emotional narrative in which the non-human values of "big rich ecosystems" and the human values of "[r]ecreation, spirituality, [and] aesthetics" meet (Snyder, 2000, p. 352). For Snyder (1974; 2000) and others (Evernden, 1999; Oeschlaeger, 1991; Strong, 1995; Jickling, 2009), the idea of wilderness, and the places so-called, offers an alternative to the

rationality and quantitative science of the Cartesian framework and twentieth-century Modernism. 'Wilderness' here becomes, ironically, a humanist project that calls upon emotional, experiential, and spiritual understandings of place to accentuate the connectedness of human beings, non-human species, the land, the earth, and the cosmos.

In reconsidering and redefining 'wilderness', some scholarship has also taken up a reconsideration of the oft-criticized Romantic perspective from which the contemporary idea of wilderness originates. Evernden (1999) states that the word romantic "has come to be used as a synonym for 'sentimental' or 'utopian'. It has also been used to describe persons who desire a return to some idealized state of nature" (p. 29). This characterization, he argues, "stems from a misunderstanding of what the Romantic movement was" (p. 30). For Evernden and scholars that followed him (Jickling, for example), Romanticism grew from resistance to Cartesian reductionism, the Industrial Revolution, and the diminishing and devaluing of emotional, sensual, and experiential ways of understanding the world. As Jickling (2009) states,

> These poets went to wild places, not because they were nature lovers, but because these places were thought to be less hostile to their task. In remote corners of England (and Europe) they pondered the emergent industrial revolution and the knowledge it rested on (p.164).

For some, Romanticism and 'romantic' thinking challenged the deeply embedded norms of the Cartesian framework, offering a different way of understanding, and being in, the world (Evernden, 1999; Jickling, 2009). In direct reaction to Cronon's (1996) call to abandon romantic constructions of wilderness and to see the *wild*ness in city streets, Derby et al. (2015) call for "a reversal of the Romanticism that is so often critiqued" (p. 7), arguing that without "opportunities to encounter the power, independence, activity, and self-determining qualities of the wilderness" (p. 9), we risk being left with only urban nature: "pigeons and parks," as they put it (p. 1). Jickling (2009), too, seeks to "take back the word romantic and

make it a symbol of resistance" to show that it is "bold ideas" labeled 'romantic' that often carry the most "potential to challenge the status quo." (p. 169).

Picking up many of the themes of Romanticism, radical environmental and intellectual literature has also contributed to upholding and reconsidering the concept of wilderness. Both environmental philosophy and the radical environmentalism of deep ecology have challenged the status quo of contemporary evaluations of the relationship between human beings and their environments, or the non-human world. Though not always speaking directly to 'wilderness' but often with reference to places called 'wilderness' or experiences derived from such places, both emphasize direct participation and active engagement, dissolve the distinctions between subject and object, nonhuman and human, and nature and culture, and remind us that it is perilous to assume "that there can only be one 'right' version of reality" (Evernden, 1999, p. 73). Environmental philosophy and deep ecology literature reconsiders the place of emotion and experience in understanding the world and in doing so leaves open a place for the concept of wilderness to continue to exist, though importantly as something altogether different from the problematic trappings of Cartesian dualism and colonial constructions of an empty landscape (Oeschlaeger, 1991, Abram, 1996, Evernden, 1999).

The ways that the concept of wilderness has been deconstructed, reconsidered, and in some ways redefined have had important implications in Yukon Territory. The tourism industry, the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement, and land use planning all invoke the concept of wilderness in various and sometimes contradictory ways. This chapter will explore how these invocations of wilderness emerge from and shape the social, environmental, and political climate of Yukon Territory and the Peel Watershed. But before doing so, the ways that wilderness appears in language will be critically examined to show how the concept is being reconsidered and rearticulated in twenty-first century conservation. As conservation groups and environmental movements work to mend contentious

relationships with First Nations, the ways that understandings of the landscape are communicated and drawn upon in decision-making processes must be carefully considered. This chapter examines how the Peel Watershed becomes a wilderness and what this means for the people that live there.

The language of 'relatively pristine' wilderness

For many, what characterizes the idea of wilderness as problematic or not has a large part to do with the way we talk about it. For Cronon (1996) in the early 1990s, "the time [had] come to rethink wilderness" (p. 7). Cronon concludes this rethinking by arriving at the conclusion that '*wild*ness' offers a less problematic indicator, for "wildness (as opposed to wilderness) can be found anywhere" and does not rely on the colonial tropes and embedded dualities that 'wilderness' does (p. 24). More than a decade later, J.B. Callicott (2008) offers 'biodiversity reserve' as a replacement for 'wilderness area' for much the same reason. The language of wilderness causes discomfort in critical examinations for the way it constructs landscapes with extensive Indigenous occupation and transformation as 'empty' and 'untouched'. Wilderness is criticized for being 'romantic' and 'nostalgic', as well as for its expression of a desire to return to a place that never existed, a 'pristine' or 'primeval' place where human beings were absent.

Use of the word 'wilderness' does not escape criticism in the Peel Watershed or Yukon Territory. As First Nations say, "there's no word like 'wilderness' in our language" (qtd. in Berkman, 2004). Yet 'wilderness' becomes an entrusted term to describe the watershed, used by conservation groups, tourism, and First Nations. In the language and literature of conservation websites, news stories, and the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement, the Peel Watershed is an "*untouched* wilderness" (Fusion, 2014), "one of North America's largest remaining *pristine* areas of wilderness" (Chris Rider, Peel

Gathering), or "one of the largest *intact* and *unsettled* wild places left on Earth" (Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, 2015) (*emphasis added*). This language emphasizes the non-human characteristics of the Peel, something that many Yukoners take issue with but conservation groups use to assign value to the watershed and garner support for protection from both inside and outside of Yukon Territory. As a staff member at the Yukon Conservation Society (YCS) stated,

> We certainly do in our messaging talk about the Peel as one of the largest relatively intact wilderness areas left in North America. And I think that we use that because it does appeal to people; but we always partner it with an acknowledgement that it's a place that people use (YCS Interview #1).

Conservation groups use strategic messaging to spread awareness of the Peel Watershed and advocate for its protection. As a staff member of Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Yukon Chapter (CPAWS) stated,

> If you look at the Peel pledge that we designed, it's a lot about the landscape and the animals and the lack of development and the wildness, because we want to capture that sort of person. And if we started talking about the Umbrella Final Agreement, for example, it's not something that has the same ability to move someone who doesn't have as much of an understanding about why that's important (CPAWS Interview #1).

This participant went on to state that "the legal case boils down to the Final Agreements. It boils down to reconciliation. But in order to succeed overall we just want to make sure we have as many people as possible on our side" (CPAWS Interview #1). A former CPAWS director and wilderness tourism operator reiterated many of the statements about the language and subject matter used to appeal to the environmental audience:

> Sometimes words are used, like 'this is the last pristine wilderness in North American' and it's not. There's other pristine … and it's not pristine either. There's been mining going on in there for 60 years (Tourism Interview #5).

For many, this language is a tool; a way of grabbing the attention of the ecologically-minded across Yukon and across Canada. The tactic seems to be working, as the Peel campaign has drawn national and

international attention, with tourism numbers in the watershed continuing to increase (Tourism Interview #5). Moreover, a large percentage of the public consultation submissions received by the Yukon Government came from outside of Yukon Territory, many from individuals who had never visited the Peel but whose environmentalism obviously aligned with the message of Yukon conservation groups (Yukon Government, 2013).

The people and organizations who pen the statements that describe the Peel Watershed as 'pristine', 'unsettled', and 'untouched' are often the ones working with First Nations to publicize the Peel Watershed, to acknowledge it as First Nations' homeland and traditional territory, and to help First Nations culture thrive in the watershed and in Yukon as a whole. The language seen on conservation group websites, in tourism, and in documents produced by artists and environmentalists often contradicts the language used in practice. In interviews, participants challenged the colonial notions of wilderness as exhibited by such language. As a YCS staff member stated, "I personally hate the word pristine … because very few places really are, including the Yukon" (YCS Interview #2). For CPAWS, "the use of the word 'pristine' is actually something we try and avoid. I sometimes accidentally use it. It's a nice word. It feels good to use" (CPAWS Interview #1). And for another YCS staff member,

> This notion of wilderness, again, it's a very romantic concept. Again, I think it often implies absolute pristine ... the human element isn't part of that and so with the Peel, that's not the case. It's a landscape that has sustained First Nations for thousands of years, so there is that human element. Our First Nation partners often bristle when we talk about … when we refer to the Peel as pristine because it's not pristine. You know, people have used it and people continue to use it (YCS Interview #1).

The Peel Watershed is not *empty, pristine*, or *untouched.* It may be *intact*, from an ecosystems perspective, and it may be *unsettled*, if ones' understanding of *settlement* aligns with a Euro-Canadian perspective and does not acknowledge the differing ways that Indigenous peoples use and occupy space. It seems that members of conservation groups in Yukon Territory, as well as the general public, are under no illusions as to what the Peel Watershed is or is not. They do, however, choose their

language in strategic ways, trying to navigate between appealing to well known environmental narratives and 'romantic' conceptions of wilderness and nature on the one hand, and a decolonizing narrative that challenges problematic notions of pristine emptiness on the other.

The ways that First Nations use the word 'wilderness' in connection to the Peel Watershed opens up further questions around the value of the concept of wilderness and its colonial legacies. As mentioned, scholars have aggressively challenged the concept of wilderness for its erasure of Indigenous peoples, their historical transformation of the land, and the continued existence of land-based lifestyles. First Nations people in Yukon Territory have challenged the concept of wilderness by noting that there is no word for it in their language and by asking conservation groups to refrain from using terms such as 'pristine', which undermine their own cultural history. But First Nations in Yukon Territory, too, use the word 'wilderness' to talk about the Peel Watershed, often as a substitute for traditional homeland. Speaking of how those with a close connection to the land tend to treat it, a Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in man, and employee of the First Nation, stated that "[y]ou never take more than you need; you never take more than what the wilderness and the environment can produce" (First Nations Interview #11). This use of 'wilderness' echoes the ways that wilderness is often used by environmentalists, the tourism industry, and the general public. I opened this chapter with a statement made by Vuntut Gwitchin Chief Bruce Charlie at a Peel Watershed Gathering in Whitehorse in 2016:

> The Vuntut Gwitchin people have made it very clear to me and to the former leaders of our government that we have an obligation to protect this pristine wilderness, caribou habitat and ecosystems, as it is an essential element of our very existence as Gwich'in people across the North (Peel Watershed Gathering, Whitehorse, June 2016).

Here, 'pristine wilderness' is synonymous with other descriptions of the watershed – 'caribou habitat' and 'ecosystems'. From the deconstructionist perspective, this use appears paradoxical. At the same event, Thomas Berger, legal representative for the Peel case against Yukon Government, described the

watershed as “a wilderness that is sacred to the First Nations,” again implying that wilderness was something tangible or material rather than a conceptual product of the colonial period.

First Nations in the Peel Watershed are by no means the first Indigenous population to become wrapped up in discussions of ‘wilderness’ or to use the concept of wilderness themselves. In his exploration of First Nations’ relationships to the land and ideas of ownership, Todd (2008) shows how the Squamish First Nation in British Columbia wrote ‘wilderness’ into their land use plan, stating that five identified Kwa kwayx welh-aynexws, or ‘Wild Spirit Places’, “should be managed to retain their wilderness attributes” (Squamish First Nation, 2001, p. 45). The Squamish use of the term that was deployed not so long ago to remove them from their traditional territory is comparable to First Nations’ use of ‘wilderness’ in the Peel Watershed.[27] As Todd (2008) states, the way that wilderness is being invoked here is “with connotations distinct from the earlier use of the term by non-Aboriginal peoples” (p. 122).

When they do speak of ‘wilderness’, First Nations in the Peel Watershed do not do so with connotations of pristine and empty landscapes, and generally express discomfort or frustration when others do; rather, they, like the Squamish, use ‘wilderness’ to illustrate the Peel’s cultural and spiritual importance. In conducting interviews with First Nations individuals throughout my fieldwork, the term ‘wilderness’ was rarely used at all; rather, ‘home’, ‘homeland’, or ‘traditional territory’ tended to be the terms First Nations participants used to describe the Peel and their reasons for wanting to see it protected. When ‘wilderness’ was used it was either in the context of tourism or with reference to the ways that non-First Nations peoples speak of the Peel Watershed. For example, as one Elder stated, “There’s lots of people who are not First Nations but they want to protect the Peel because of canoeing or hiking. It’s beautiful, it’s wilderness, whatever they call it” (First Nations Interview #7).

[27] In the early twentieth century, the Squamish First Nation, along with the Musqueum and Tsleil-Waututh, were expelled from what became Stanley Park in Vancouver so that “a pristine site of nature” could be created (Mawani, 2007, p. 13).

Pojar (2006) states that “wilderness in the Yukon includes people and their traditional activities” (p. 21). The attempt to write Indigenous people into ‘wilderness’, which Baldwin (2009) has called “one of colonialism’s most enduring symbols in Canada” and one that “is quite literally founded on the erasure of aboriginality,” seems paradoxical at best (p. 432). But the reconsideration of what signifies ‘wilderness’ arises from an inability to let go of the concept, paired with an acknowledgement of the problematic and colonial history of the concept. In Canada, ‘pristine’ and ‘empty’ wilderness has become unstable, and any serious consideration exposes the concept of wilderness as racist and rooted in problematic dichotomy. But as peopled, shaped, and ‘relatively pristine’, ‘wilderness’ not only remains in Yukon Territory and the Peel Watershed, but thrives, referenced everywhere from tourism to land use planning and government (Peel Watershed Planning Commission, 2011; Environment Act, 2014; Environment Yukon, 2015).

In interviews, multiple participants spoke of the compatibility of First Nations culture and ‘wilderness’ (CPAWS Interview #2, #3; YCS Interview #1; Yukon Government Interview #1). This sentiment challenges the decades of expressed incompatibility of ‘wilderness’ and Indigenous peoples, or people period (Cronon, 1996; Spence, 1999; Braun, 2002). As participants noted, when environmental campaigning began in the Peel Watershed in the early 1990s, some First Nations held on to their suspicions of conservation and ideas of wilderness, while others felt differently (CPAWS Interview # 2, # 3). As one member of CPAWS who helped kick start conservation in the Peel remembered,

> There were those First Nations individuals who, right from the very start, were very comfortable with the word wilderness. And yet there were others who very strongly said that there is no such word as wilderness in First Nations languages; that the closest facsimile to wilderness is home (CPAWS Interview #2).

Even with the reduced presence of First Nations in the Peel Watershed, following the processes of colonial territorialization explored in the previous chapter, conservation in the Peel had to contend with an expected suspicion or all out rejection of ‘wilderness’ among some First Nations peoples.

Environmental conservation and its ideas of wilderness encountered self-governing First Nations with a newly acquired political autonomy. Even should it have wanted to, conservation in the Peel Watershed could not have upheld colonial understandings of wilderness, for the watershed was indeed peopled and those people had an ever-increasing degree of power. So conservation groups broke with conventional ideas of wilderness and worked to redefine 'wilderness' to fit this extraordinary region. As the same participant recalled,

> I think that our values were always that First Nations and people in general are absolutely part of wilderness; ... [wilderness] did not preclude homeland, traditional territory, traditional harvesting, all of those kinds of values. I would argue that over time wilderness and First Nations values were not in opposition; that they were in many ways, I would argue from where I stand, mutually beneficial (CPAWS Interview #2).

Conservation in the Peel Watershed moved forward with a recognition that the "fragmentation of landscapes [and] loss of habitat … were much more of a problem than the absence of people" (CPAWS Interview #3). Over time, some First Nations began to see their values reflected in the conservation movement and its reconsidered ideas of wilderness. And as conservation groups evolved in their understandings and articulations of what fit, and did not fit, into a 'wilderness', First Nations, too, began to speak in different ways. As the same participant noted, "when I go to Peel meetings, I hear people invoking the word wilderness ... and I'm talking about First Nations folks now ... in ways that I hadn't before" (Ibid).

Through their reconsideration of the concept of wilderness, both First Nations and non-First Nations Yukoners attempt to challenge the problematic elements of the concept and redefine 'wilderness' to fit their specific needs. In doing so, they construct the Peel Watershed as a different kind of 'wilderness', one that has apparently shed its colonial associations but none of its wildness. In Yukon Territory, decolonization and reconciliation come with a reconsideration of language and a reflection on taken for granted understandings of nature. In the following section, I will explore the various and at

times contradictory ways that the concept of wilderness is invoked in the Peel Watershed, the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement, and Yukon Territory as a whole.

Invocations of wilderness in the Peel Watershed:

What qualifies a landscape as a 'wilderness'? This chapter, and this thesis, does not take wilderness to be a *material thing* but a *concept*, "an abstraction used in everyday language" (Castree et al., 2017). And like any abstract concept, 'wilderness' becomes more real the more we talk about it; it becomes more Peel Watershed-esc and less urban park-esc the more our culture agrees upon what a 'wilderness' is, and thus, what it is not. 'Wilderness' is invoked in the Peel Watershed in a number of ways, all of which would find no grounding would it not be for their ability to fit into embedded cultural understandings about the world and the human place within it. In this section I will examine how 'wilderness' is used in tourism, in reference to biodiversity and the ecosystem, in expressions of spirituality and the sacred, and in the idea of wilderness as home to First Nations. The concept of wilderness is not always used to describe the Peel Watershed, to be sure, and the characteristics that define the Peel as a 'wilderness' do not necessarily appear in other so-called 'wilderness areas' in Canada or around the world. But the variability in understanding and the inconsistencies in discourse present important considerations for how understandings of the watershed are culturally rooted and reveal the ways that the Peel Watershed and 'wilderness' are entangled in a complex and ever-changing conceptual framework.

Wilderness as the romantic other:

Despite critical scholarship that has pointed to wilderness as socially constructed, racist, and reliant on the problematic separation of nature and culture, wilderness as the romantic other is sustained in Yukon Territory and the Peel Watershed through tourism. As a member Yukon's tourism department stated, wilderness is "one of the number one reasons people [visit Yukon Territory]; … [people] just associate the North with this untouched, pristine wilderness sort of place" (Yukon Government Interview #1). Like other parts of Canada, particularly in the North, Yukon draws tourists seeking experiences in nature, ranging from scenic drives and day hikes to multi-week hunting, hiking, and canoeing expeditions. As de la Barre (2009) states, "[n]o superlatives have been spared in the marketing of the Yukon as a wilderness destination" (p. 94). Narratives of mystery, authenticity, and a genuine connection to nature draw tourists from across Canada and around the world (de la Barre, 2009).

In the Peel Watershed, tour companies offer expensive guided trips that range in duration from days to weeks. Guided trips into the Peel are generally longer than trips in other parts of Yukon as well as more expensive, due to the remote nature of the watershed and the fact that the majority of trips are fly-in.[28] In interviews, both hunting outfitters and the more numerous canoe guides commented on the international make up of their clientele, as well as the overwhelmingly positive impressions they are left with (Tourism Interview #1, #2, #3, #4, #5). As one hunting outfitter stated,

> I've got people who travel all over the world. I have people that have climbed Mount Everest that have hunted with me … [a]nd they are all like, 'this is one of the prettiest places in the world I've ever seen' (Tourism Interview #4).

[28] Ruby Range Adventure lists a guided, 20 day trip down the Bonnet Plume River at $6,555 per person (Ruby Range Adventures, 2016), while Up North Adventures lists a guided, 15 day trip down the Snake River at $5,295 (Up North Adventures, 2016b). Hunting expeditions are even more costly (Tourism Interview #2, #4).

When asked why people come from such distances to travel in the Peel Watershed, most responses centered on experience. As one long-time guide in the Peel reflected, "I'd say there are a number of reasons why people come on the trip: … to experience wild country", to see large wildlife in its habitat, or simply to have "an experience to itself that doesn't really relate to anything else in a person's life" (Tourism Interview #5). For another outfitter, tourist's comments were "not comments like 'oh, I shot the biggest moose in the world'", but rather about the country:

> They've never been anywhere like that. And that's the drawing card for what I'm selling. ... You can buy a hunt anywhere in North America if you're a hunter. But this is a little bit different. It's a hunt in a very unique area (Tourism Interview #2).

And in yet another guide's opinion, what river travelers seek is "not unlike the trophy sheep hunters that are coming to collect their sheep. For them it's a trophy experience" (Tourism Interview #1).

Almost all tour companies operating in the Peel Watershed use 'wilderness' as a primary, if not central, selling point. They highlight traveling in the region to experience "the most authentic wilderness travel" (Up North Adventures, 2016a); a trip "into the very heart of Yukon's untouched wilderness" (Ruby Range Adventures, 2016); or a chance to be "far from civilization" (Up North Adventures, 2016b). Canoeists who choose the cheaper but more logistically challenging self-guided option also come to the Peel to consume an experience in 'nature' or 'wilderness' that they contrast to their experiences in the places they call home (Tourism Interview #5).[29] These tourists are often from Yukon or are a mixed group of Yukoners and non-Yukoners (Tourism Interview #1). And while their motivations for traveling in the watershed may be diverse, along with their prior experience traveling in remote landscapes, they, too, come to the watershed for an experience in one of the most rugged and inaccessible regions in North America. For Braun (2002), this desire to visit 'off the beaten track', 'undiscovered', or 'pristine'

[29] Self-guided hunting tourism in the Peel Watershed is prohibited; licensed hunting guides hold concessions, large amounts of territory in which they may operate, in the watershed (Tourism Interview #2).

nature reflects a sense of nostalgia and loss; a mourning for places that represent a time before modernity and are thought to be "about to disappear" (p. 136).

In wilderness tourism and in literature on the Peel Watershed produced outside Yukon Territory, the watershed is, both implicitly and explicitly, consistently sold and referenced as one of the last 'wilderness areas' remaining in North America (Ruby Range Adventures, 2016; Clifford, 2003; Fusion, 2014; National Geographic, 2014). In this way, tourism clings to elements of the frontier narrative that Cronon (1996) argues are central to wilderness preservation. As one tour company states, the Bonnet Plume River (one of the Peel's tributaries), is "[o]ne of North America's last true frontiers" (Ruby Range Adventures, 2016). The mythic frontier, which is preserved in Yukon Territory through the Klondike Gold Rush and a long history of mining, is celebrated with what Cronon calls a "mourning [for] an older, simpler, truer world that is about to disappear forever" (p. 13). In the Peel Watershed, the mineral frontier and the wilderness frontier compete, and for those seeking wilderness, the two are largely incompatible.[30] Though mining remains a central part of Yukon's economy and identity, an emphasis on the Peel as a 'true wilderness' unlike any other in North American deploys a narrative of potential loss; if the watershed is opened to development, the 'wilderness frontier' that is the Peel Watershed will be yet another paved over wilderness. Thus, as the narrative goes, it must be experienced before it is gone.

From the sheer vastness of the landscape to the absence of other human beings, it is the wild aspects of the Peel Watershed that draw tourists from around the world. In this way, wilderness tourism both delivers and depends on the dichotomy of nature and culture. In one tour operator's opinion, tourists who come from highly populated regions in southern Canada and around the world cannot help

[30] In 2014, tourism represented roughly 4% of Yukon Territory's GDP (Halliday, 2016); mining and other extractive industries represented 13.2% the same year, but have declined since (to 10.1% in 2015) (Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2016a, 2016b). Mining's decline is considered to be a result of a combination of global market prices as well as increased regulation places upon environmental assessments and the projects themselves; tourism, on the other hand, is considered to be increasing (Halliday, 2016; YCS Interview #2;Yukon Government Interview #2; Tourism Interview #5). Yukon's largest contributor to GDP is public administration, or Government, representing 23.3% in 2014 and 23.6% in 2015 (Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2016a, 2016b).

but contrast the Peel Watershed to the places they call home (Tourism Interview #5). The journey to reach the watershed becomes an experience of the other in itself, during which the tourist is "getting the sense, bit by bit, of getting more and more removed from their lives, and more remote" (Tourism Interview #5). The experience of entering the Peel Watershed over mountains and glaciers with no visual element of human alteration, followed by weeks in a landscape with few other travelers, delivers what many tourists seek. And most tourists and tour operators want to keep it this way. When asked about the compatibility of mining and tourism in the watershed, one hunting outfitter responded simply, "Do you want to go sit on the beach beside an oil well?" (Tourism Interview #4). And not only are those in favour of protection strongly against mining in the Peel, but the very possibility of mineral exploration and the construction of roads represents a direct threat to the animals, river systems, and connectivity that make the Peel the 'wilderness' that it is. As one tour operator stated, "Roads are just a death sentence because it ends up just becoming a spider web of roads to all of these mining claims" (Tourism Interview #5).

For the wilderness tourism operator, that the Peel is considered a wilderness so distinct from the locations tourists arrive from sustains their business. And 'wilderness', whether it is the Peel Watershed or another remote location, becomes a resource that is in demand because it is in "shorter and shorter supply in the world" (Tourism Interview #5). As one tour operator noted, tourists "enjoy the silence; they enjoy seeing no one, seeing nothing human made" (Tourism Interview #3). They enjoy, as Braun might put it, the absence of culture. This participant went on to emphasize the importance of the 'wilderness experience' for tourists: "You try to preserve the wild aspects of your trips by being the only one out there" (Ibid). The practice of 'trip staggering', as discussed by de la Barre (2013), speaks to this concerted effort made by the tourism industry to uphold narratives of the frontier and empty wilderness that draws so many tourists to Yukon and the Peel Watershed.

The ways that wilderness is invoked in tourism in the Peel Watershed build upon uses of wilderness in nineteenth century North America, in which frustrations with industrial capitalism and a mourning for a vanishing frontier led many to seek those landscapes perceived to be untouched, sublime, and wild. Many tourists travel to the Peel Watershed for reasons not dissimilar to those of Thoreau, Muir, and Roosevelt, and though their motivations are undoubtedly diverse, individuals who seek an experience in an empty or pristine 'wilderness' inevitably uphold the dichotomy of nature and culture in their participation in the myths that sustain wilderness tourism. The paradox of wilderness tourism, Braun argues, lies in the "[promise] to leave culture behind" (p. 131). Such a promise, of course, can never be fully delivered, for wilderness tourism relies on the myths and technologies of the society it offers an escape from.

The experiences of tourists in the Peel Watershed and the construction of the Peel as a wilderness to be protected have served the conservation movement in important ways. The 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement uses tourism to assign the watershed value as it is, without roads, mines, and other forms of industrial development. The movement relies on the stories, photographs, writings, and films of tourists to illustrate the importance of the watershed as a 'wilderness' and has largely succeeded in mobilizing non-Yukoner understandings and experiences of wilderness for the conservation agenda, as illustrated in the previous section. The conservation effort to bring the Peel Watershed to widespread attention has both relied on and contributed to tourism in the Peel. And through strategic language targeted at those who continue to identify wilderness with problematic colonial understandings of empty land, many of the narratives of wilderness that critical deconstructionists have called into question are carried on. In this way the Peel, like 'wilderness', is cloaked in paradox. No matter how wild, intact, and remote, the Peel Watershed is brought into the very culture that it is differentiated from; constructed, defined, and determined by the culture it is supposedly opposed to. And without the construction of wilderness as the romantic other, it is unlikely

that the Peel would be visited by so many, valued so highly, and subjected to such unceasing effort to protect it.

Wilderness as biodiversity, ecosystems, and connectivity:

The 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement constructs the Peel Watershed as a wilderness that is in need of protection.[31] Conservation groups such as Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Yukon Chapter (CPAWS), Yukon Conservation Society (YCS), and Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y), along with countless public submissions, literature, films, and photographs, emphasize characteristics of the Peel Watershed that speak to its value as a 'wilderness', an 'intact ecosystem', and a 'pristine watershed'. But to say that conservation groups and the conservation movement rely solely upon problematic constructions of wilderness as the romantic other would miss the myriad of arguments being made by the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement and risk classifying 'wilderness' in a way that does not reflect how it is actually invoked in the Peel Watershed.

When asked about the value in protecting the Peel Watershed from industrial development, many interview participants responded in ways that expressed values connected to the environment itself; these responses cast aside human values for a time and spoke to the ecosystem, the species, and the waterways. For a YCS staff member, it was about taking "a chance to start from conservation as a priority rather than some sort of afterthought" (YCS Interview #1); for a Whitehorse artist and filmmaker, it was about seeing that watershed as "a substantial chunk of the earth that is vital [and that is] living as it's been living for a very long time" (Environmental Activist/Artist Interview #1); and for many, it was about looking at the world and the deep scars that human beings have left upon it and

[31] Though the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement to protect the entire Peel Watershed from being opened up to industrial development began in the mid-2000s during the land use planning process (Protect the Peel, 2011c), conservation efforts in the Peel Watershed emerged in the early 1990s (CPAWS Interview #2).

stopping ourselves from doing the same in the Peel (Environmental Activist/Artist Interview #1; First Nations Interview #4; Tourism Interview #2, #5). As one interview participant, a hunting outfitter, stated,

> There needs to be part of the planet that is kept intact as it originally was. There just does. If we're going to manage the whole planet, we need to have areas like that set aside, because we manage everything else (Tourism Interview #2).

Many believe that one only has to look outside of Yukon Territory to see why protecting the Peel is so important. Fragmented habitats pose direct threats to species in most of Canada and around the world, and in the Peel many see an opportunity to preserve this 'relatively intact ecosystem' for the species that live there as much as for any human use.

Some interview participants connected species and ecosystems health to climate change, viewing the prohibition of industry in the watershed as a positive action in an increasingly unstable world. This should come as little surprise considering that Northerners know that the North is warming faster than other parts of Canada and many witness these changes first hand. Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Elders in their 80s made mention of climate change or told of species loss that they had observed in their lifetime. As a Vuntut Gwitchin employee stated, "I cannot ignore the screaming notion inside of me that is saying that we have to stop this somewhere. We have to stop it somewhere. And the Peel Watershed is the perfect example" (First Nations Interview #4).

The ways that the concept of wilderness becomes entangled with environmental narratives that discuss species health, intact ecosystems, and climate change are varied and inconsistent. For many, 'wilderness' has become synonymous with ecosystem, un-fragmented habitat, or simply with the watershed itself. Conservation groups and proponents of protection illustrate the Peel's biological importance by situating it in the context of Canada and North America, pointing to its size, its diversity of species, and its lack of roads and human settlements to emphasize its value for non-human life. Here,

'wilderness' is taken up as habitat, primarily of large mammals such as grizzly bear, caribou, moose, and sheep but also of all plant and animal life; 'wilderness' becomes synonymous with 'intact ecosystem', or a place where biodiversity is not under threat. As a member of CPAWS, Yukon stated, the Peel is "a unique area where wilderness and plant life and migratory birds thrive" (CPAWS Interview #1). This respondent went on to discuss more 'cultural' elements of the Peel, such as it being the traditional homeland to First Nations, but here expressed 'wilderness' as something *material*, categorized along with plants and animals. In contemplating 'wilderness', a Whitehorse artist and filmmaker articulated a similar environmental narrative:

> I personally don't have a formal definition of [wilderness], but my own imagination … what the word evokes for me is a place where … the vast community of life unfolds unfettered. And that can include us (p. 2).

Wilderness, for some, simply means the place where the complexities of the non-human world – and perhaps the human world, too – unfold.

In his critique of the concept of wilderness, Cronon (1996) problematizes the ways that our culture romanticizes and celebrates places with minimal human impact while neglecting the 'nature' we see all around us. He urges us to see the human impact in so-called wilderness landscapes and the wildness in our human landscapes. While interview participants and Yukon conservation groups expressed the necessity of appreciating the wildness that can be found in human landscapes (within Whitehorse city limits, for example (Environmental Activist/Artist #1; YCS Interview #1)), the discourse tied to the Peel Watershed is inevitably about appreciating the wildness that a relative lack of human impact enables. In this way, understandings of, and efforts to protect, the watershed align more with Derby et al.'s (2015) counter-argument to Cronon, in which they remind us not to forget the wilder, less human-altered areas of the world in our appreciation of urban 'nature'. The ways that 'wilderness' becomes synonymous with 'intact ecosystem' in the Peel Watershed do not necessarily negate a human

presence, but express a feeling that, because of its rarity, the wildness found in the 67,431 square kilometer Peel Watershed is of that much more value than the wildness found in city streets.

The challenge of disentangling discussions of 'wilderness' from a conservation perspective focused on more scientific, biological, and ecological, elements of the Peel Watershed can largely be attributed to the ways that conservation groups in Yukon Territory have weaved the two together. As an early director of CPAWS, Yukon stated of the intentions of the Peel campaign,

> The kind of wilderness values that we espoused right from the very start were really very broad values that talked about the intrinsic value of wilderness, the spiritual and cultural value of wilderness, and also wilderness as a vast repository of biodiversity and wild creatures (CPAWS Interview #2).

The intentional focus on both the esoteric values of wilderness, as this participant put it, and scientific or economic values emerged at a time when "there was kind of a movement across country to downplay the emotional, or what was perceived as the emotional, arguments of wilderness in favor of a more rational, scientific approach" (Ibid). Moreover, connections of 'wilderness' to more ecologically-grounded arguments found traction in a growing movement to promote large-scale landscape conservation with the goal of protecting habitats and connecting ecosystems, or 'wilderness areas', over vast distances. From this movement arose the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y), which over two decades has worked to develop a connected network of conservation areas from Yellowstone National Park to the Peel Watershed (Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, 2016). The combination of arguments used by Y2Y that bring in biodiversity, ecosystems health, and 'wilderness' values have not only been successful in protecting large tracts of land through the Rocky Mountain corridor, but also helped to shape conservation in the Peel Watershed by expanding conservation efforts from one river – the Bonnet Plume – to three rivers, igniting what would become the *Three Rivers* campaign. The *Three Rivers* campaign was expanded in scope further still following increased First

Nations involvement, leading to a focus on the entire Peel Watershed and the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement (CPAWS Interview #2).

By focusing on the watershed as the scale for conservation, the Peel campaign makes an argument for the protection of the *whole*, reflecting emergent values of connectivity and a focus on the entire ecosystem. Braun (2002) states that ecosystems ecology, which gained popularity following World War II,

> offered a new holism that was still deeply imbued with romantic and holistic tropes, recycling old notions of balance, divine providence and natural order, and clothing them in the objective language of science (p. 229).

Braun (2002) takes a critical perspective of this combination of 'wilderness' and science under the field of ecosystems ecology, arguing that both 'wilderness' and ecosystems ecology perpetuate the problematic construction of 'the environment' as external. Just as the concept of wilderness often relies upon a narrative of loss (Cronon, 1996; Braun, 2002), arguments for the protection of the ecosystem, too, suggest that "once (modern) human activity *modifies* a landscape it can no longer properly *be* an ecosystem" (Braun, p. 235; emphasis in original). This perspective, he believes, ignores the ways that landscapes and ecosystems are constantly being modified by both human and non-human forces.

Narratives of loss and a fear of industry's impact are undoubtedly at play in the Peel Watershed, but critical examination of the effort to protect the Peel Watershed from industrial development reveals that conservation in the Peel, whether focusing on 'wilderness', ecosystems health, or some combination, are neither straightforward nor simplistic. For many, protecting the Peel is about finding a place for mining as much as for 'wilderness'[32]; about protecting ecosystems, species, and water as much as protecting a recreational or spiritual landscape for humans; and about protecting those ecosystems,

[32] The vast majority of interview participants declared themselves "not against mining" in Yukon Territory, but strongly against mining in the Peel Watershed for the impact that it could have on species, ecosystems, tourism, and 'wilderness'.

species and water for the vitality of First Nations peoples and culture as much as protecting the things themselves.

The ways that the concept of wilderness becomes wrapped up in environmental narratives in the Peel Watershed has a large part to do with the fact that it is often used interchangeably with ecosystem, watershed, and traditional homeland by both First Nations and non-First Nations peoples. All signifiers invoke an element of the whole; an idea, to borrow from an ecosystems ecology approach, that the whole "is more than the sum of its parts" (qtd. in Naveh, 2000, p. 11). However problematic, any threat to this whole is perceived as real, whether through the lens of the grizzly bear conservationist, the wilderness canoeist, or the First Nations harvester; and it is in mobilizing against the very specific threat of industrial development that such a diverse cast of actors find common ground. As I will explore in the follow section, conceptions of the whole emerge in expressions of the Peel Watershed as sacred and reveal, at least in part, why wilderness as a concept has yet to be displaced by the quantitative framework of science.

Wilderness as sacred:

Expressions of the Peel Watershed and 'wilderness' as sacred both draw on the spiritual and emotional experiences of individuals and provide a motivation for conservation that is coupled with a scientific, or rational, approach. Spiritual connections to place, land, and the non-human world have been explored in many Indigenous cultures who do not acknowledge the concept of wilderness (Berkes, 1999; Cruikshank, 2005; Johnson, 2012). In the 'Protect the Peel' campaign, the spiritual connections experienced by First Nations and non-First Nations peoples join the varied understandings of wilderness in the effort to protect the watershed. For many, the Peel Watershed and 'wilderness' are sacred, and enable a spiritual or emotional experience. These experiences are not always tied to an understanding

of the Peel as a wilderness, to be sure, but the ways that 'wilderness' is invoked from this non-rational, non-scientific perspective arise from spiritual connections drawn from experiences on the land.

As noted, First Nations do not often use the term 'wilderness' when they speak of the Peel Watershed. When they do, it is generally strategic and echoes the ways that it is used by conservation groups and in tourism. Yet First Nations do speak of the spiritual significance that the watershed holds for them. For First Nations peoples, the spiritual value of the Peel Watershed is inseparable from its value for the species, clean rivers, and continuation of cultural practices. For a Na-Cho Nyak Dun guide and Elder,

> One of the reasons why I want to see the Peel River Watershed protected is because of the water and our traditional values there on the land – the berries we pick and eat; the roots we pick and eat and use for our traditional medicine. Animals out there need clean water. We can't have mining, gas exploration polluting the water. I don't want to see that happen (First Nations Interview #2).

For Na-Cho Nyak Dun Chief Simon Mervyn, the Peel Watershed "is where we go to rest and pray and acknowledge our ancestors; and to me, to our way of thinking, we need the values of the land intact" (qtd. in Calumsday, 2010). First Nations peoples have eloquently articulated their connection to the Peel Watershed in interviews, at rallies, and in short films (see *The Peel Watershed: A First Nations Perspective*, 2010). And this connection reflects many of the ways that Indigenous peoples speak about land and place globally (Berkes, 1999; Cruikshank, 2005; Johnson, 2012; Monchalin, 2016).

Non-First Nations peoples, however, have long struggled to express a connection to the land in ways that that are not dismissed as 'flakey' or 'romantic'. In Yukon, as a YCS staff member believed, this seems to be changing. The space for non-First Nations Yukoners, many of whom possess their own land-based knowledge from years spent in close relationship with the land, to articulate emotional, experiential, and spiritual connections to the Peel Watershed has grown from the success of Yukon First Nations in illustrating the importance of traditional, and subjective, knowledge in making decisions

about the land (YCS Interview #2). Though in no way intending to compete with First Nations expressions of value, non-First Nations peoples have expressed their own connections to the land and the nonhuman world through the Peel Watershed land use planning process and the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement.

From this emotional, experiential, or spiritual perspective, 'wilderness' comes to represent the whole in ways similar to the intact ecosystem's representation of the whole in a scientific framework. In a film exploring the multitude of connections people have to the Peel Watershed, Marten Berkman interviews spiritual leaders to probe deeper into this sense of the sacred in the natural world. As one monk states, "[t]he sacred is the perception of the whole as a unity without any separation" (qtd. in Berkman, 2004). This sense of the sacred, one participant felt, comes in part from a lost or disrupted connection to values drawn from wild places:

> When I think of how people who spend time in natural areas, undomesticated areas I should perhaps say … wild areas …, [they] have a sense of humility and awe and transformation in those places.… Those experiences, I think, characterize many people's religious experiences within a church, within a temple. But if we were to look at the cave art 30,000 years ago, the first human structures which appear to have had some ceremonial, spiritual, sacred importance, they were in societies that didn't have churches; they were living intimately with the land and other creatures (Environmental Activist/Artist #1)

The idea of the whole as sacred, and the watershed, ecosystem, or 'wilderness' being whole – that is, without roads and non-fragmented – brings ecology and environmental protection into conversation with spirituality and experiences of the sacred. While the concept of wilderness is not always present in such articulations, the struggle for non-First Nations peoples who are not religious to express their experiences on the land does, in the Peel Watershed and elsewhere, come out in the language of wilderness. In her examination of expressions of value in the Peel Watershed, Ranspot (2012) argues that "wilderness has replaced the role of religion in generations past in terms of conductiveness to feeling part of and connected to something bigger than oneself" (p. 52). For many, then, 'wilderness' is a

spiritual place where the ability to connect to 'something bigger' is as valuable as the connections between the species that live there.

Some interview participants suggested that the struggle to articulate the spiritual and emotional values of 'wilderness', or wild places, arises from having to translate qualitative values into a quantitative framework (Tourism Interview #5; Environmental Activist/Artist Interview #1). One participant spoke of the challenges of expressing conservation values to a government that "just seems to see it in terms of dollars and cents and economic benefit" (Tourism Interview #5). Of the qualitative values of the Peel, she stated, "It's so hard to actually articulate what that is and yet I think it's that connection that is the main drawing force for people to come and experience it" (Ibid). As many interview participants acknowledged, emphasizing the economic or scientific values of the Peel Watershed through discussions of habitat, ecosystems health, climate change, or tourism generation, present important arguments for protecting the watershed, but must be accompanied with emphasis on the values of 'wilderness', wild places, and the experiences they enable. As one participant stated, "If we reduce everything to science, I think in many ways we miss the bigger picture" (CPAWS Interview #2). He followed this statement with an example, recalling how in the early years of the Peel campaign, Yukon's Wildlife Conservation Society did a conservation assessment on the Peel Watershed, presenting their conclusions in the form of disconnected 'key habitat areas'. In his perspective,

> Using the rational approach of conservation biology, no one ever talked about protecting the whole Peel Watershed. Conservation biology hardly ever ... [says] 'let's go for the whole watershed' because you don't come to that conclusion. Whereas it if you allow the wilderness values to enter into the discussion, that's a chance to really do exciting things that have obviously conservation value benefit but that are bigger than what science is going to deliver (Ibid).

For many, 'wilderness' values are those that cannot be measured with numbers; rather, they are measured through the subjective experiences of those who spend time in so-called wilderness. The 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement has long relied upon such expressions of value. Whether

through the language of wilderness or not, personal connection to the Peel has become an underlying theme, which both challenges conceptions of wilderness as empty and rearticulates wilderness as something that human beings belong in.

The 'wilderness values' expressed in the Peel campaign reveal an attempt to both articulate the complex and subjective connections people have to the watershed, and have those connections considered alongside economic and scientific arguments. The perceived depreciation of emotional and experiential understandings of the environment in the face of scientific rationality has allowed for such arguments to gain precedence in the Peel Watershed. For one participant, conservation and 'wilderness values' were inseparable from emotion:

> This is about feelings; it's about love of place, love of homeland. And we should not be shy about using those arguments and we should never apologize for them. They are central to the human experience. And obviously we need to consider all the other factors, but I don't think we should be shy about being bold about those values, kind of at the height of the rational age, where everybody needs numbers and all the rest of it (CPAWS Interview #2).

The emotions derived from experiences in the Peel Watershed arise from a direct, personal connection to place, something that scholars, environmentalists, and interview participants all emphasize is essential for any serious conservation effort to emerge. Evernden (1999) calls our disconnection from the environment a symbolic "cutting of the vocal chords," arguing that by separating ourselves from the environment, we do not connect, and by not connecting, we do not allow it to speak (p. 14). For those who express 'wilderness values' as a fundamental motivation for conservation in the Peel Watershed, connections in the Peel are not merely about connection to the landscape and the non-human world, but, too, about connecting to oneself and 'something bigger'; they are environmental, cultural, emotional, and spiritual.

The Peel Watershed continues to be imagined as a wilderness, whether through the lens of conservation science and intact ecosystems or through the understanding that the wildness and lack of

human footprint in the watershed enable a spiritual connection or a sense of the sacred. And while much effort has been made to challenge conceptions of wilderness that erase the presence of Indigenous peoples and perpetuate the understanding of nature and wilderness as separate from human beings and their society, the continuation of the concept of wilderness and the reimagining of wilderness as a place in which human beings belong deserves our attention. In the Peel Watershed, this reimagining illustrates an attempt to challenge problematic dichotomies, find connections between cultures, and re-establish a physical, emotional, and spiritual relationship with the land, something that both environmentalists and First Nations agree is fundamental to the future health of our planet.

Wilderness as home:

First Nations' connections to, and understandings of, the Peel Watershed are unquestionably different from non-First Nations peoples. The Peel Watershed is home to First Nations peoples from the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, Na-Cho Nyak Dun, and Vuntut Gwitchin First Nations, and the Tetłit Gwich'in Council, and the ways that the watershed has been occupied, traveled on, and relied upon by First Nations has been emphasized by First Nations peoples and well documented by researchers (Locke & Peepre, 2008; Slobodin, 1962; Mishler, 1990). As Peepre & Locke (2008) state, for First Nations in the Peel Watershed, "[h]ome was where the animals were – the winter hunt camps, the summer fish camps" (p. 58). As illustrated in the previous chapter, First Nations interview participants discussed their own experiences in the Peel Watershed, as well as familial connections to the watershed going back centuries. Overwhelmingly, the Peel Watershed is a place that First Nations peoples use and have used since time immemorial. As previous Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Chief Darren Taylor states, "our First Nation members are pretty much in that country every day of the year for one reason or another" (qtd. in Calumsday, 2010). First Nations have never stopped articulating their connection to the whole Peel

Watershed and their understanding of the entire region as home, despite having to settle for small parcels of settlement lands over which they have control, while non-settlement, or traditional, lands make up the overwhelming majority of the Peel Watershed.[33]

For First Nations, conservation is never just about conservation. Rather, it is one piece of a more holistic understanding of how to achieve and maintain a healthy community. First Nations' arguments for why protection of the Peel Watershed is so vital are made through a perspective of the watershed as home. Narratives of spirituality, cultural revitalization, and health are continually expressed, and the well-being of the land is intricately connected to the well-being of the animals and of the people. First Nations peoples know that if mining enters their home, their bodies, communities, and culture will suffer. This is especially true for the Tetlit Gwich'in, who live in and around Fort McPherson, NWT, at the mouth of the Peel River and downstream from the whole watershed. For all First Nations living on or near the watershed, but especially the Tetlit Gwich'in, development in any part of the Peel Watershed would have direct implications. Home, then, cannot be conceived of as simply the places that people live in and encounter every day, but must encompass the entire territory that sustains First Nations' culture, spirituality, traditional foods, and overall health. And so, we must ask, if the watershed is home, can it also be wilderness?

For those who call the Peel Watershed home, the concept of wilderness offers little to serve them in their argument against opening up the Peel to industrial development. But for many First Nations peoples, protection through conservation becomes viable for the ways it presents an alternative to development and for the degree to which control over traditional lands can be maintained (First Nations Interview #10). First Nations, one Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in employee pointed out, would never conceive of protecting the Peel because it was empty, which he believed was how some First Nations

[33] Non-settlement lands make up 97.3% of the Peel Watershed, while settlement lands managed by the four First Nations make up 2.7% (Staples, 2013).

peoples understand conservation values that highlight 'wilderness' (Ibid). As another TH employee noted, someone who lives on the land, has a relationship to that land, and sees the land as home could never consider the land as an empty wilderness**.** Yet the concept of wilderness has become a large part of the argument made by the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement, which has made a long and concerted effort *not* to construct the watershed in ways that challenge First Nations perspectives.

In many ways, First Nations peoples have been unable to avoid developing a relationship with environmentalists and conservation groups; the evolution of this relationship will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 5. For conservation groups, the concept of wilderness has long been an important factor in arguing for protection in the watershed. On conservation group websites and in sources promoting protection, the 'uninhabited' and wild characteristics of the watershed are quickly followed by statements about the Peel as First Nations homeland and traditional territory, which First Nations peoples still occupy and use. First Nations understandings of the watershed as home have been combined with environmentalist understandings of the watershed as a wilderness, both contributing to a conservation movement now decades old. And so when Thomas Berger states that the Peel Watershed "is a wilderness that is sacred to the First Nations" (Peel Gathering, 2016), the comment is taken in stride, revealing the long and at times contentious relationship between First Nations and conservation groups and between conceptions of home and conceptions of wilderness. As one interview participant noted of his conservation work with Yukon First Nations,

> There certainly was not and still is not any kind of homogeneous perspective on wilderness, particularly among the First Nations. It really boils down to various communities and individuals (CPAWS Interview #2).

For conservation groups in Yukon Territory, and increasingly across Canada, the time has passed when 'wilderness values' can be expressed without an acknowledgement that said-wilderness is also someone's home. In this way, traditional homeland, too, becomes wrapped up with 'wilderness' in the

movement to ‘Protect the Peel’. As Pojar (2006) states, “[t]he word wilderness is not found in aboriginal languages, yet for many people in the north it has come to mean a still natural condition found in ‘our homeland’” (p. 21).

Conclusion

The concept of wilderness has undergone critical (re)examination in academic scholarship, environmental movements, and in efforts to improve the relationship between settler populations and Indigenous peoples around the world. This body of literature showed that the concept of wilderness was rooted in colonial understandings of land, nature, and human occupation; that it rested firmly within the nature-culture duality; and, most critically, that it erased the historical and ongoing presence of Indigenous peoples, the ways that they transformed the landscape, and the profound effects of colonization. In Yukon Territory, a questioning of the concept should be seen to arise out of the First Nations land-claims process and increased First Nations autonomy as much as it comes from a scholarly rethinking of ‘wilderness’ and ‘nature’ within environmental conservation. First Nations peoples have consistently asserted their connection to the land in ways that do not fit with understandings of wilderness as empty, untouched, or pristine; and, over time, settlers have learned to see how these problematic constructions of the land as wilderness have ignored, erased, and exploited Indigenous ontologies while having devastating consequences for Indigenous populations.

But despite the valuable and recognized condemnation of the concept of wilderness, it remains in Yukon Territory and the Peel Watershed. The ways that the tourism industry draws on the myth of the frontier and narratives of loss uphold many of the assumptions about wilderness that deconstructionists have called into question; scientific perspectives that equate wilderness to the ecosystem, biodiversity, and landscape connectivity construct an argument for the non-human species of the watershed but,

some argue, continue to construct such spaces as external to human beings and culture; spiritual understandings of wilderness and the Peel Watershed as a sacred place emphasize the connection that human beings have to the land and the non-human world, using emotional and experiential perspectives to challenge the dominant paradigm of scientific and economic rationality; and finally, the ways that the word 'wilderness', for which First Nations have no translation, has become conceived of as traditional homeland to First Nations peoples reveals an attempt to challenge colonial understandings of wilderness by reinserting people into the concept's definition.

Some elements of the concept of wilderness are always going to be problematic. It is a concept rooted in racism and dualistic understandings of the world, and for some, its use continues to stir reminders of colonization and the ways that settlers asserted their understandings of the land over Indigenous populations. But for others, the idea of wilderness continues to serve a purpose. 'Wilderness' continues to be used in the Peel Watershed and elsewhere for the reason that a great many people lack a spiritual framework to speak of the emotional and spiritual power that large, 'wild' places hold for them. 'Wilderness' is both considered alongside the scientific framework's intact ecosystems and diversity of species and used to challenge that framework by replacing the objective and rational with the emotional, experiential, spiritual, and poetic. While some continue to challenge the concept of wilderness for being nostalgic and romantic, others embrace 'wilderness' *because* it is romantic. And in the eyes of some, it simply presents the best way of articulating the diverse set of values that the Peel Watershed holds. As one participant stated,

> [Wilderness is] a convenient word, in the absence. You know, I'm quite sure that probably those original First Nations languages didn't have a word for wilderness. And you wouldn't, really, if you are in such a complete relationship with the land where you thought of animals as brothers and sisters … That's a completely different ontology than we can even imagine today. And in that case there is no separation between people and animals, or very little, and there would be no need for a word like wilderness (CPAWS Interview #3).

By articulating ‘wilderness’ as *one* of the reasons to protect the Peel, conservation groups attempted to transcend the elements of the concept that stir reminders of problematic colonial conservation while holding on to those that align with First Nations worldviews, that speak for the concerns of the non-human world, and that remind society that the landscape is more than numbers, maps, and use value. ‘Wilderness’ continues to be an antidote to an alienated society. And just as it served as an escape from urban-industrial society in the nineteenth century, ‘wilderness’ continues to exist as the remedy for the very society that created it.

Chapter 5

Ambivalence, dependence, and a new conservation paradigm?: Examining the relationship between First Nations and conservation groups in the Peel Watershed

Introduction

In July 2014, the First Nations of Nacho Nyak Dun, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and Vuntut Gwitch'in, together with Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Yukon Chapter and Yukon Conservation Society, took the Yukon Government to court over the government's modifications to the *Final Recommended Plan* for the Peel Watershed. The case, *First Nation of Nacho Nyak Dun, et al. v. Government of Yukon,* was heard by the Supreme Court of Canada on March 22, 2017. At the time of writing, a decision on this case has not yet been released. Represented by famed Indigenous rights lawyer, Thomas Berger, the case brings into question land use planning in Yukon Territory, the consultation process, and the interpretation of First Nations Final Agreements. But the case also represents an increasing trend in Canada: the collaboration of First Nations and conservation groups.

For Indigenous populations across Canada dealing with both unresolved land claims and centuries-old treaties, fundamental legal victories such as *Delgamuukw* (1997), *Haida Nation* (2004), and *Tsilhqot'in Nation* (2014)[34] have clarified questions of title and the duty to consult (Low & Shaw, 2011; Bains, 2014); yet many First Nations still struggle for fundamental rights to land, water, resources, and political autonomy. The increase in court cases that address unresolved land claims, a lack of consultation on development projects, and interpretations of past treaties and government to government agreements is well known (Hume, 2014; Bains, 2014; Slowey, 2015). Less explored,

[34] *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia; Haida Nation v. British Columbia; Tsilhqot'in Nation v. British Columbia.*

however, is the growing trend of Indigenous peoples finding allies in environmentalists (exceptions include: Davis, 2011; Skura, 2015).

Yukon Territory's political landscape has shaped the relationship between conservation groups and First Nations in powerful ways. As Slowey (2015) notes, the recent settlement of land claims in Yukon Territory has given Yukon First Nations a political autonomy largely unknown among Indigenous populations in other parts of the country and enabled them to avoid or overcome many of the challenges faced by Indigenous populations across Canada. Because Yukon First Nations are self-governing, conservation groups and the territorial and federal government *must* work together with First Nations governments in natural resource management, parks and protected areas, and land use planning. Guided by First Nations Final Agreements, this obligation to work with First Nations has led Yukon conservation groups down a path that has challenged many of the historic conflicts embedded in the relationship between Indigenous peoples and environmental movements.

As discussed in the previous two chapters, colonial visions of environmental conservation have had profoundly negative effects on First Nations, and many Indigenous peoples across Canada have developed negative associations with parks, protected areas, and environmental conservation generally (Loo, 2001, 2006; Braun, 2002; Sandlos, 2003, 2008; Tyrrell, 2008; MacLaren, 2011; Neufeld, 2011). As critical scholarship notes, the ways that colonization is reasserted through environmental conservation have only recently begun to be addressed, and communication between environmentalists and Indigenous peoples is by no means a given in Canada or elsewhere (Neufeld, 2011; Low & Shaw, 2011; Stevens, 2014).

Colonial conservation has long shaped the landscape of Yukon Territory, as well as the relationship between First Nations and settlers (Nadasdy, 2003; Martin, 2011; Neufeld, 2011). In recent years, Yukon First Nations and Yukon conservation groups have come together in their shared goal of

protecting the Peel Watershed from industrial development. This relationship does not always proceed smoothly; nor, as many interview participants noted, are feelings about this relationship homogenous. In interviews, participants expressed diverse views on the value of the alliance between conservation groups and First Nations in the Peel Watershed. For some, it was merely strategic, one that would likely dissolve once the outcome of the Peel Watershed case is determined. But for others, the resources shared, alliances formed, and relationships built between First Nations and conservation groups speak to a new paradigm in environmental conservation. This paradigm acknowledges the tragic legacies of colonialism that have bounded and managed First Nations traditional territories through the administrative framework of the colonizer, disrupted Indigenous cultural practices, and severed the deep connection between First Nations peoples and the land. Ultimately, this paradigm envisions an environmental conservation that works with First Nations instead of in isolation. Through a recognition of the colonial past and concerted efforts to strengthen this relationship in the present, some view conservation as a path to reconciliation.

In this chapter, I will examine the relationship between conservation groups and First Nations in the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement. Following a literature review discussing how conservation has been deployed as a tool of colonization in Yukon Territory and across Canada, I will begin by examining two Canadian case studies in which conservation groups and Indigenous peoples join forces to oppose industrial development. Using these examples as context, I will then illustrate how First Nations and conservation groups developed an alliance in the Peel Watershed and explore the challenges and successes of that relationship. I will conclude by suggesting that despite existing challenges, the ways that conservation groups engaged with First Nations in the Peel Watershed represent important steps towards a more reconciliatory conservation, and a more open and mutually beneficial relationship between First Nations and environmental movements. For conservation across Canada to truly reach a new conservation paradigm that works with Indigenous populations and

establishes mutually beneficial and lasting relationships, the successes and challenges exhibited in the Peel Watershed must be examined, incorporated, and built upon.

Conservation as colonization

In Canada and around the world, environmental conservation has served as one of many tools by which the colonizer exerted power over the colonized. Conservation has been used to bring local populations under administrative control, to bound and control land, and to assimilate local populations into the culture and society of the colonizer through displacement, disenfranchisement, and the regulations of traditional practices (Neumann, 1999; Spence, 1999; Loo, 2001; Binnema & Niemi, 2006). Indigenous peoples have protested, of course, and with varying degrees of success. From the continuation of traditional practices in protected areas to organizing against the creation of parks to using the legal framework of the colonizer to assert their traditional rights, Indigenous peoples have stood up against conservation that worked, either intentionally or not, to further alienate them from their land, culture, and traditional practices (Spence, 1999; Sandlos, 2003; MacLaren, 2011; Youdelis, 2016). Yet in much of the world, colonial conservation has become the norm.

Conservation in the form of protected areas grew from American models of conservation that constructed wilderness and defined it as unoccupied; this model evolved into US, and later Canadian, national parks. Stevens (2014) calls this conservation model 'the old paradigm', noting that it is characterized by protection of land and biodiversity, governance by the state, no human occupation or "use of natural resources", and the forced removal of local populations (p. 36). As discussed in the previous chapter, state control over Indigenous territories was legitimized by assumptions that Indigenous peoples were incapable of managing wildlife and land, fed by the racist theories of *terra*

nullius and the noble savage, as well as European ideals regarding the ways that 'nature' was to be used, appreciated, and experienced (Spence, 1999; Loo, 2001; Sandlos, 2003; Nadasdy, 2005).

In late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Canada, parks and protected areas were created to serve middle-class urban ideals and recreational pursuits. When Indigenous and local settler populations stood in the way of these ideals and pursuits, their occupation and livelihood practices were deemed inappropriate and made illegal, while the people themselves were at times forcibly removed (Binnema & Niemi, 2006; Mawani, 2007; MacLaren, 2011; Craig-Dupont, 2011). Early wildlife managers worked to eradicate Indigenous hunting practices and techniques, such as spear fishing and hunting, as well as the killing of animals for sustenance rather than sport (Loo, 2001; Sandlos, 2003; Binnema & Niemi, 2006). As Sandlos (2003) illustrates, southern Canadian romantics, naturalists, and game hunters who traveled north in search of what they believed to be the last wild lands in North America returned south with accounts of a diminishing caribou population, which they attributed to the wasteful hunting techniques of local Indigenous peoples. Similar assumptions of 'wasteful' or 'improper' hunting techniques among Indigenous peoples in the nineteenth and twentieth century led to increased federal government regulation of hunting practices and access to traditional territories and 'resources' (Loo, 2001; Nadasdy, 2003; MacLaren, 2011).

In Yukon Territory, like the Canadian North as a whole, narratives of species protection and wilderness conservation became embedded with nation-building strategies and government attempts to bring the North and its peoples under central control (Neufeld, 2011; Martin, 2011). Neufeld (2011) shows how in the mid-twentieth century, federal government desires to modernize the North through "civilizing Indians" led to an increased presence of government administrators and wildlife scientists, whose conservation and assimilatory policies resulted in game regulations, an attempt to transition local peoples to farming, and, in 1943, the creation of the Kluane Game Preserve, in which "all hunting would

be forbidden" (p. 244). Martin (2011) discusses how in Northern Yukon, conservation in the form of protected areas grew in response to potential industrial development in the 1960s and 1970s. Here, wildlife scientists largely overlooked the concerns and traditional practices of First Nations peoples in their attempt to protect threatened wildlife and their habitats (Ibid).

In recent years, following the settlement of land claims and the establishment of First Nations governments in Yukon Territory at the turn of the twenty-first century, the governments of Yukon and Canada, as well as Parks Canada, have all made efforts to evolve in their relationship with First Nations regarding land use planning, natural resource management, and protected area conservation. This can be seen in co-management plans, the co-management of natural resources, and the reinstatement of hunting rights. But as critical scholarship has noted, although the land claims process and the settlement of individual Final Agreements has enabled Yukon First Nations to challenge the conservation values that served to further assert colonial domination over their lives, livelihoods, and culture, the ways that First Nations experience conservation often equates to a colonial relationship (Nadasdy, 1999, 2003; Cruikshank, 2005).

Critical scholars continue to point to the ways that the state and the Euro-Canadian settler population exert power over First Nations populations in explicit and implicit ways. Co-management projects, seen in natural resource management, tourism, and the creation of protected areas all give the impression of a reconciled relationship between First Nations and settler populations, but often hide the power relations at play. As Nadasdy (1999, 2003) discusses, co-management projects are often challenged by the ways in which First Nations must translate their complex systems of knowledge into the scientific framework of the state and submit to the presumed expertise of government scientists and natural resource managers. Critical works exploring the *antipolitics* of "recognition and reconciliation" show that efforts to reconcile the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state

often and "ironically further the colonial project" by denying First Nations the political agency to which they are entitled and led to believe they possess (Youdelis, 2016, p. 4; Nadasdy, 2005b; Coulthard, 2014). This struggle against what many perceive to be a form of neocolonialism was expressed in interviews and discussed in chapter 3, whereby some First Nations people feel that their knowledge, traditional practices, and relationship with the land is still disregarded or considered inferior to the Euro-Canadian knowledge of the state (First Nations Interview #5, #9, #10).

The antipolitics of conservation and the ways that settler knowledge is perpetuated through established structures of governance must be considered in Yukon Territory and the Peel Watershed. Tourism values, narratives of wilderness, and parks and protected areas represent, for some, a form of neocolonialism in which First Nations understandings and uses of the land are downplayed or essentialized. But, as I will argue, the political autonomy, strong cultural ties, and ever-growing capacity of Yukon First Nations all work to challenge conservation that attempts to reassert colonial power dynamics and in doing so helps redefine the relationship between First Nations and conservation groups in Yukon Territory and the Peel Watershed.

Changing conservation relationships across Canada

For some, the increasing involvement that Indigenous peoples play in conservation globally represents a new paradigm for environmental conservation (Paulson et al, 2012; Stevens, 2014). In Canada and Yukon Territory, this recent shift emerges in response to a long history of colonial conservation, to which Indigenous peoples have expressed open opposition for its continuation of colonialism and the colonial relationship. Among Yukon conservation groups, there seemed to be no doubts as to whether this new paradigm had arrived. As one interview participant posed rhetorically, "If you're not working with First Nations on conservation, really what are you doing?" (Y2Y Interview #1).

Another participant referenced Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's comment about gender equality in his cabinet by stating simply, "'this is 2016'. This is the way you work" (CPAWS Interview #1). In moving beyond a conservation model that imposes values, boundaries, and practices upon First Nations populations, conservation groups point to collaboration as "a new way of doing business" (qtd. in Baldwin, 2014, p. 440). The ways that scholars and interview participants discuss this collaborative model as a given reflect a common vision as to how a new conservation paradigm should operate. Yet the vision and the reality are not always aligned; or, perhaps more accurately, conservation in the Canadian context offers few examples in which this vision has become the reality. Before I begin my examination of the ways that conservation groups and First Nations have come together in the Peel Watershed, I will briefly discuss two Canadian examples where this new paradigm is tested, and which may offer important comparisons to the ways that conservation is practiced in Yukon Territory and the Peel Watershed.

The Great Bear Rainforest

For decades, the Great Bear Rainforest along the north coast of British Columbia has been a place where conservation values and First Nations values encounter one another in ways reminiscent of the Peel Watershed. This large coastal rainforest has been the site of anti-logging campaigns since the mid-1990s and, following the massive Clayquot Sound anti-logging protests, has seen a wealth of conservation interests pour large amounts of time and resources into the region (Low & Shaw, 2011). Using the publicity generated from anti-logging environmentalism, the Heiltsuk First Nation and neighbouring First Nations began "to pressure the BC government, forestry, and environmentalists to negotiate the use of their traditional lands in ways that would directly benefit their communities" (Low & Shaw, 2011, p. 16). In doing so, First Nations elevated the Great Bear Rainforest beyond a dualistic

environmental conflict between industry and environmentalists, adding the complex politics of land claims, decolonization, and traditional knowledge.

First Nations in the Great Bear Rainforest faced a number of challenges that are worth considering in the context of the Peel Watershed. First, as they never reached land claims agreements (Davis, 2011), they did not have the political autonomy to negotiate with the provincial government and "were acknowledged simply as one of several stakeholders" in land use planning (Ibid, p. 17). As Davis states, "[t]his was unacceptable to the Heiltsuk as it ignored their ownership of the land" (p. 17). Moreover, First Nations in the small coastal communities that had a historic dependence on commercial fishing were faced with a declining commercial fishery and high unemployment rates (Davis, 2011). Environmentalists who brought ideals of protecting 'wilderness' and biodiversity were often at odds with local peoples, for whom economic alternatives were a must, but who were also hesitant to support an unsustainable clear-cut logging industry in their traditional homeland (Low & Shaw, 2011). As Davis (2011) notes, in part because of their lack of political agency and an immediate need to develop a conservation plan that met the needs of the community as well as the environment, eight First Nations used support from the David Suzuki Foundation to create an alliance, "set[ting] the stage for the relationship that would develop between the Heiltsuk and environmentalists" (p. 19).

The alliance between conservation groups and First Nations in the Great Bear Rainforest speaks to many of the trends emerging in the Peel Watershed. In the Great Bear Rainforest, First Nations were able to use the funding offered by conservation groups to make up for the political autonomy they lacked and the economic challenges they faced. And they were able to create strategic relationships, aligning themselves only with "more professionally based" conservation groups and not the activists "who pursued direct action tactics" (Davis, p. 20). Unlike the Peel Watershed, conservation groups in the Great Bear Rainforest were numerous and based outside the region, either in Vancouver or further

afield.[35] This gave conservation groups an ability to reach and international audience and transform local concerns into a campaign of national and international significance, something that, while achieved in the Peel, was not done to quite the same scale; but external conservation groups in the Great Bear Rainforest were also faced with the challenge of gaining support from local peoples and negotiating their place as external actors in a place where local residents were suspicious of their conservation values. In the Peel Watershed, on the other hand, CPAWS, Yukon and YCS being based in the territory certainly helped to build relations with First Nations and local peoples.

As I will show in the context of the Peel campaign, conservation groups present a much needed source of funding and capacity to First Nations that, whether self-governing or not, must concern themselves with the many needs of the community, usually with below adequate resources. But First Nations must navigate the conservation values brought by environmentalists with the values they have held for generations. In doing so, disagreements emerge and compromise must be reached. Perhaps more than any other environmental campaign in Canada, the Great Bear Rainforest is comparable to the Peel Watershed for the ways that it was originally conceived by external actors (conservation groups), and only upon First Nations involvement was it able to transcend dualistic trappings and reach a level of engagement with local communities that enabled new relationships to form and creative solutions to be considered. Moreover, only through this collaborative relationship could the campaign challenge some of the values of colonial conservation and reach a place that begins to reflect this new conservation paradigm.

[35] Davis (2011) lists the following environmental groups as being involved, to varying to degrees, with the Heiltsuk First Nation and in Heiltsuk territory in the campaign to protect the Great Bear Rainforest: Ecotrust Canada, the David Suzuki Foundation, the Sierra Club of BC, the Raincoast Conservation Society (now two organizations: [1] Pacific Wild and [2] Raincoast Conservation Foundation), Greenpeace, and Living Oceans, Round River Conservation Studies, The Nature Conservancy of Canada and its US counterpart, and the Wilburforce Foundation.

Clyde River, Nunavut

In Clyde River, Nunavut, the recent alliance between Greenpeace and the Inuit against seismic testing for oil and gas has come as a surprise to many who know Greenpeace for its opposition to seal hunting in the Arctic. In 2014, Greenpeace issued an apology for the impacts that its anti-sealing campaign, begun in the late-1970s, had on Inuit subsistence through the resulting bans on seal products in the US and Europe (Kerr, 2014). Now, Greenpeace is aligning its environmentalism with the Inuit through support for Clyde River's opposition to seismic testing and has provided funding for the community to challenge the National Energy Board (NEB) in the Supreme Court of Canada for approving a permit for seismic testing without proper consent (Skura, 2015). As Clyde River mayor, Jerry Natanine, stated of Greenpeace in a CBC interview, "We wouldn't have been able to do it without them ... They're the main reason why we've gotten all the publicity we've gotten around the world" (qtd. in Ibid).

The Clyde River case is one of the most recent campaigns that use well-established environmental narratives and the international publicity generated by conservation groups to draw attention to the specific concerns of Indigenous peoples in Canada. In Clyde River, an oft-relied upon cast of environmental celebrities have helped elevate the issue to international attention, with actress Emma Thompson and Oprah Winfrey declaring their support for Greenpeace and the community (CBC News, North, 2016). And as some have noted, a successful ruling by the Supreme Court in the case, *Hamlet of Clyde River, et al. v. Petroleum Geo-Services Inc. (PGS),* et al., heard on November 30, 2016 and yet to be decided upon at the time of writing, could provide other First Nations with legal standing to oppose development projects on their traditional lands (Leahy, 2016; Supreme Court of Canada, 2017). But for many Indigenous populations, legal action at this scale cannot succeed without the publicity and funding provided by well-established and far-reaching conservation groups because of the high cost of legal action and the publicity surrounding it.

Clyde River, the Great Bear Rainforest, and the Peel Watershed all provide contemporary examples of an evolving relationship between Indigenous peoples and conservation groups. The few examples of Indigenous-conservation group relationships that extend beyond a particular campaign suggests that these relationships are primarily strategic, largely characterized by conservation groups offering financial support to Indigenous concerns while gaining a level of acceptance of their environmental campaign. But the ways that publicity is generated for Indigenous-specific concerns about land claims, decision-making processes, and the continuation of traditional lifestyles, along with more universal concerns about the health and well being of species and habitats, illustrates that conservation groups have a role to play beyond that of financial provider. And through alliances, conservation groups are often able to use Indigenous knowledge, connections to the land, and the legal rights rooted in treaties and land claims to generate support for conservation, stop or delay industry, and establish lasting legal protection for regions of concern. Moreover, the ways that these environmental issues bring conservation groups into direct contact with local populations offers an opportunity to address long-standing animosities, find new connections, and take strides towards a reconciled relationship.

A short history of conservation and conservation groups in the Peel Watershed

Although conservation groups and an organized conservation movement only arrived in the Peel Watershed in the early 1990s, early campaigners brought with them experience from other environmental movements, personal experiences in the Peel Watershed, and an established framework of conservation values (CPAWS Interview #2, #3; Tourism Interview #5). When Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Yukon Chapter was established, it already existed nationally (Tourism Interview #5). Originally focused on preventing mining activity along the Bonnet Plume River, the Peel's most eastern

tributary, CPAWS was tied to the Peel Watershed from the outset (Tourism Interview #5). Early CPAWS efforts were coordinated largely by outdoor enthusiasts, who saw the rivers and lands that they valued becoming threatened by the expansion of mining into more remote regions of Yukon Territory (CPAWS Interview #2). As a former CPAWS director noted, the conservation effort to protect one river evolved into a movement to protect three rivers – the Bonnet Plume, Wind and Snake, the primary rivers for canoe tourism and the more rugged and remote section of the Peel Watershed (Ibid).

In the years that followed, CPAWS began to reach out to First Nations peoples who had historical connections to the watershed, but whose presence in the area had diminished due to the ongoing effects of colonization (CPAWS Interview #2). As one former CPAWS director remembered, many younger First Nations peoples had become disconnected from the Peel Watershed:

> Some of the young staff in the First Nations office didn't really even know where the Snake River was, where the Bonnet Plume River was. And it struck me that it there was a whole community there that had been disconnected from the Peel Watershed over a period of time. They didn't have the capacity to get out there, because it's not cheap to get out there, and they were disconnected from that part of the world (CPAWS Interview #2).

By the end of the 1990s, the efforts of CPAWS had become centred around publicizing the Peel Watershed through inviting First Nations peoples from Yukon communities to join on "river trips and scientific surveys" (CPAWS Interview #2, #3; Tourism Interview #5). The campaign became one in which CPAWS sought to engage the local population while using the increasing awareness about the Peel to present the issue to a wider audience. In 2003, the *Three Rivers Journey* represented the culmination of many years of campaigning. Writers, photographers, and artists were invited to the Peel Watershed and, along with community members and environmental activists, travelled down the watershed's three eastern rivers – the Bonnet Plume, Snake, and Wind – and met First Nations residents from Fort McPherson at the mouth of the Snake River for a gathering (Tourism Interview #5). In the years following, a book (with contributions from Canadian writers such as John Ralston Saul and Margaret

Atwood) and a touring presentation on the *Three Rivers Journey* brought the campaign across Canada and garnered national awareness and support for the Peel Watershed (CPAWS Interview #2). Both the *Three Rivers Journey* and the subsequent touring presentation were largely orchestrated by CPAWS, Yukon and, to that point, represented the peak of conservation campaigning in the Peel Watershed (Tourism Interview #5; CPAWS Interview #2).

In 2004, when the Peel Watershed Planning Commission (PWPC) began the land use planning process, the conservation efforts of CPAWS in the Peel Watershed were already more than a decade old. As one former CPAWS director remembered, by the time land use planning began, "there was already widespread support for serious conservation in the Peel Watershed" among both First Nations and non-First Nations Yukoners (CPAWS Interview #2). Following increased First Nations involvement in the campaign, the effort to protect the three eastern rivers of the Peel Watershed was expanded to protect the whole watershed (Ibid). CPAWS campaigning for the Peel Watershed continued through the seven-year land use planning process and eventually became characterized by the phrase, 'Protect the Peel'.

Yukon Conservation Society (YCS), which began in 1968 and has since played a fundamental role in education, research, and public policy input in the territory, has also played a central role in the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement (Yukon Conservation Society, 2016). YCS has brought its focus on "working landscapes" to the Peel, complimenting CPAWS' focus on 'wilderness values' (YCS Interview #1). External conservation groups have played a fairly minimal role in the Peel campaign, making it somewhat unique among environmental movements in Canada.[36] Although Yellowstone to Yukon

[36] External conservation groups are here understood to be conservation organizations that are based outside of the places in which they are campaigning, in this case Yukon Territory. Environmental conservation across Canada and elsewhere continues to be led, more often than not, by large, international Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (ENGOs) such as Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), and others (Davis, 2011; Low & Shaw, 2011; Stevens, 2014). In interviews, multiple participants noted that these groups expressed interest in becoming centrally involved in the Peel Watershed, but were requested not to by Yukon-based conservation groups and Yukon environmentalists. Since the 1990s, the campaign has been guided by Yukon's two conservation groups.

Conservation Initiative (Y2Y) lists the Peel as one of its 'Hot Projects', its role is largely in support and publicity (Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, 2016; Y2Y Interview #1).[37] As Y2Y's current Program Director for BC and Yukon mentioned, Y2Y allows the two Yukon conservation groups complete control over education, public campaigning, and community involvement (Y2Y Interview #1).

The role that conservation groups have played in the still evolving politics of land use planning in Yukon Territory must be emphasized. As one former CPAWS director remembered, when the PWPC released its *Final Recommended Plan* for the Peel Watershed in 2011 and the Yukon Government subsequently rejected that plan, it was then CPAWS-director Mike Dehn who, leading up to Yukon Government's release of their own plan in January 2014, foresaw the possible need for legal action:

> He called up Berger and … he didn't know him, right …, but he said would you be interested in this case? And so, there was a period of time where Berger looked through all the paperwork and decided he would. And there was about a two-year period where everything kept getting stalled. And for the government to actually get the *Final Recommended Plan* and then they went and drafted their own plan. It was just one thing after another, and finally they come out with their own plan and adopted it. And within a few days we were ready to launch the case. But it had taken two years of having Berger on hire to get to that point. If we hadn't done those two years … (Tourism Interview #5).

CPAWS was joined by Yukon Conservation Society and the First Nations of Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, Na-Cho Nyak Dun, and Vuntut Gwitchin in the legal suit against Yukon Government, at the time of writing awaiting a decision from the Supreme Court of Canada.

[37] Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative has offices in Bozeman, Montana, Canmore, Alberta, and Nelson, British Columbia; the Program Director for BC and Yukon operates out of Nelson (Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, 2016; Y2Y Interview #1).

Two ‘ships in the night’ or ‘a good relationship’?

The successes and challenges of the relationship between environmental conservation and First Nations in the Peel Watershed are experienced differently by different people. From a conservation perspective, the conservation successes, such as widespread support for the 80% protection decided upon by the PWPC, the legal challenges of First Nations and conservation groups against the Yukon Government, and the ability of First Nations and conservation groups to form a mutually beneficial relationship, all suggest that conservation in the Peel Watershed offers an example for conservation elsewhere to follow, and one that reflects the new conservation paradigm. But not all experience the conservation movement, land use planning, and the relationship between conservation groups and First Nations this way. First Nations experiences, for example, do not always align with this vision of success, reflecting concerns that extend beyond environmental protection, land use planning, and natural resource management.

In this section I examine the relationship between First Nations and conservation groups in the Peel Watershed by drawing upon empirical evidence provided by interview participants representing, and involved in, First Nations governments, tourism in the Peel Watershed, the Peel Watershed planning process, conservation groups, and the ‘Protect the Peel’ conservation movement. Whether positive, negative or ambivalent, the diverse and sometimes contradictory feelings expressed about this relationship reflect the diverse experiences, perspectives, and concerns of Yukoners.

Among those working tirelessly for Yukon First Nations governments to build capacity, to ensure that Final Agreements are respected and followed, and to address the never ending pile of big and small demands placed on First Nations from mining companies, other governments, and the communities themselves, maintaining a strong relationship with environmental conservation groups is often a low priority. Some interview participants clearly harboured ill feelings towards conservation groups, who

they believed constructed the Peel Watershed as a classic dualistic environmental conflict between protection and development. As one participant stated, “It’s really chiefly of First Nations land claims issue” (Tourism Interview #1). While a Tr‘ondëk Hwëch‘in First Nation (TH) employee stated,

> I don’t have issues with CPAWS; I like all the people who work there. I get many of the things that they stand for, although it’s certainly not the way I see it or the way I would approach it myself, again based primarily on all the things I’ve learned as I’ve grown up, but I think they sometimes do a big disservice. And they’re turning it into environmental versus industrial and it’s actually a government to government … it’s a breaking of a constitutionally protected agreement, a treaty (First Nations Interview #9)

When environmental protection in the Peel takes precedent over First Nations land claims and the interpretation of Final Agreements, First Nations themselves are often reminded of the colonial conservation that has tended to work against them.

In his examination of the relationship between environmentalists and the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nation in Clayquot Sound, British Columbia in the 1980s and 90s, Braun (2002) states that it was “deeply ambivalent” (p. 80). This ambivalence rings true for some in the Peel Watershed. As the same TH employee stated,

> I don’t think anyone [at TH] even thinks of having an active relationship [with conservation groups] ... It would be the same way that Yukon Government probably doesn’t have any dealings with CPAWS. Why would they? It would be like TH on a government level dealing with some NGO-non-profit that does nothing. TH is a government, and that’s part of what gets lost sight of, as well. People think of TH as a stakeholder. It’s like, no, no, no (First Nations Interview #9).

For a Vuntut Gwitchin employee, part of the challenge in this relationship lies in different perspectives of the land: “The moment environmentalists started their fight for the environment, they’ve failed, because even the term ‘environment’ is defined as something separate from us” (First Nations Interview #4). While another TH employee felt that the conservation movement had not only constructed a

polarized argument, but forced First Nations into a position of supporting either protection or development:

> Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in is not that black and white. Citizens aren't thinking, we want 80% hands off, because that's not how you care for the land, that's not how things happen. It's kind of ridiculous, but ... if that's the only option you're given, a polarized landscape, then that's what you're going to go with. That's how I feel, anyway. You know, say, 80% or 60% protection … I don't think people want to think in black and white terms (First Nations Interview #10).

For some, it is because of the often disparate and sometimes conflicting goals that the relationship can be nothing more than strategic, ambivalent, or non-existent. And unless the goals of conservation groups align with those of First Nations, conservation serves no purpose to First Nations; or worse, it gets in the way of more urgent concerns. As a TH employee stated, "the relationship between a First Nation and an environmental group ... it just wouldn't ... they're like ships in the night, passing along" (First Nations Interview #9).

Yet, an examination of the Peel Watershed planning process, the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement, and the contemporary politics of Yukon Territory reveals that the relationship between conservation groups and First Nations exists, and has existed, to varying degrees, for more than twenty years. Yukon conservation groups, like conservation groups across Canada, have become more aware that their efforts cannot be successful without the support of First Nations and local peoples. Reflecting this recent shift in conservation, one interview participant recalled going to national CPAWS meetings in the early 1990s when "CPAWS had no policy whatsoever on working with First Nations" (CPAWS Interview #2). Illustrating the ambivalence of conservation at the time, he stated that "there was very much the notion that you needed to create conservation with or without First Nations. That has now dramatically changed" (CPAWS Interview #2). A current CPAWS, Yukon staff member illustrated this change by recounting his job interview, where one of his interviewers was a former Yukon First Nations

chief. This, the participant believed, emphasized that in the twenty-first century, "CPAWS works with First Nations" (CPAWS Interview #1).

The increased engagement of environmental conservation with Indigenous peoples in Yukon Territory and across Canada should not be seen simply as a transition led by the benevolence of enlightened environmentalists. Conservation groups' increased relationship with First Nations in Yukon was in some ways forced by First Nations Final Agreements and, moreover, can be seen in the broader Canadian context to arise from lessons learned from poor relationships in the past. As shown through examples of Indigenous peoples expelling environmentalists from their territory, aligning with industry against conservation groups, and holding long-standing grudges against specific conservation groups or conservation in general (Braun, 2002; Tyrrell, 2008; Low & Shaw, 2011; Davis, 2011), conservation groups in Yukon Territory and beyond have become fully aware that the era of conservation without First Nations is no longer possible or desirable.

CPAWS became involved in the Peel Watershed and began meeting with local First Nations during the pivotal and transitional period of the early 1990s. The Umbrella Final Agreement was signed in 1993 and individual First Nations developed and signed their own Final Agreements in years following.[38] Stepping into the fray was a conservation group with representation from Yukoners but little to no support in the Peel region (CPAWS Interview #2). As one interview participant remembered, when CPAWS started advocating for protection in the eastern Peel Watershed, they were not welcomed warmly, and some First Nations peoples felt that it was a challenge to their Final Agreements:

> Land claims had been settled in the Peel Watershed and yet here was an NGO advocating for more protection than what the First Nation had negotiated through its land claim. And so, there was a lot of discomfort ... [But] from the NGO perspective, we didn't feel that the protection job was done. Many people in the First Nations did feel that land claims did protect them. So it was

[38] In the Peel Watershed region, Nacho-Nyak Dun and Vuntut Gwitchin signed their Final Agreements in 1995, while Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in signed in 1998 (Yukon Government, 2016).

> difficult to convince people that, in fact, it was a great opportunity through land claims, even though land claims was settled, to make the protection stronger (CPAWS Interview #2).

CPAWS was very much "seen initially as outsiders from the South trying to tell the First Nations what to do" (CPAWS Interview #2). But through active engagement over a long period of time, they were able to show First Nations that they had more to offer (Ibid). As another participant involved with CPAWS in the early 1990s stated,

> There was an active involvement on the part of CPAWS to take people back out onto the land, so year after year after year, there would be a rafting trip organized on one of the rivers on the Peel Watershed. And people from the communities, Fort McPherson and Mayo, in particular, were, in one way or another, engaged in these journeys. (CPAWS Interview #3)

And, as CPAWS Interview participant #2 remembered, this engagement extended into the communities as well:

> We hired people in Fort McPherson, Na-Cho Nyak Dun in Mayo, and in Dawson City, to be CPAWS employees or even First Nations employees working on the watershed. So, over time we became what I like to think of as genuine partners, working with the First Nation, instead of outside agitators (CPAWS Interview #2).

In providing First Nations peoples with employment as well as the opportunity to reconnect to the Peel, CPAWS both built relationships and generated stories, films, literature, and traditional and scientific knowledge that could then be disseminated to gain further support for their cause. As a tourism operator and former CPAWS director remembered, although the *Three Rivers Journey* in 2003 was the culmination of years of research trips, community involvement, and publicizing the Peel Watershed to audiences in Yukon and across Canada, each summer's trips always resulted in slideshow presentations on the trips and the watershed to communities around Yukon Territory. And as another former CPAWS director stated,

> I do believe that CPAWS, through endless series of slideshows and trips, [and] media events ..., did raise the profile to the point that, yeah it was extremely controversial at times, but the Peel

> Watershed became an election issue. You know, there wasn't anybody in the Yukon that didn't know about the Peel Watershed (CPAWS Interview #2).

Over the course of the campaign, conservation groups spent huge amounts of time and money bringing people down the rivers of the Peel Watershed. But from a campaign perspective, the success was immeasurable. The campaign boosted the Peel Watershed to a place that people in and outside the Yukon not only knew about, but cared about; it generated knowledge about the watershed that was both scientific and traditional, philosophic and economic, and local and national; and it constructed the Peel Watershed as a place that was both a First Nations traditional homeland and a 'wilderness', appealing to both traditional conservation goals and the goals of newly self-governing First Nations.

As some interview participants noted, there was hesitation amongst First Nations peoples who believed that they had worked too long and hard for independence to simply fall in line with the agenda of conservation groups (CPAWS Interview #2; First Nations Interview #3). But others saw CPAWS and the conservation movement for what it could provide First Nations. Years before the court case and the legal collaboration between First Nations and conservation groups, CPAWS offered First Nations opportunities to reconnect to the land, addressing some of the disastrous cultural effects that colonization and the residential school system had in alienating First Nations peoples from cultural practices and traditional territories (Nadasy, 2003; Peepre and Locke, 2008). As scholars and interview participants note, it is only in the last 50 years that First Nations peoples have moved from the land into communities in Yukon Territory, yet the cultural loss that has resulted has posed serious challenges for Yukon First Nations (Nadasdy, 2003; Neufeld, 2011; First Nations Interview # 9; Tourism Interview #1).

Only in recent years, largely following self-government in the 1990s, are many First Nations peoples in the Peel Watershed regaining an attachment to the land that was challenged or severed by the effects of colonization. As a part of their campaign in the Peel, Yukon conservation groups used their capacity, in the form of funding, trip organization, and publicity, to support First Nations in areas where

their capacity was insufficient. First Nations know that part of cultural revitalization means reconnecting to the land and traditional practices. But as many interview participants noted, this reconnection is often made difficult by the challenges of self-governance (First Nations Interview #1, #4, #9, #10; YCS Interview #1; CPAWS Interview #1). Reflecting on the struggle to maintain a connection to the land while operating a functioning government, a Vuntut Gwitchin employee stated,

> You can't go out for three months harvesting and trapping anymore. You gotta be in a government office. So our governments have the best intentions but they don't have dedicated teams to launch projects like CPAWS does (First Nations Interview #4).

Central to the Peel campaign was getting First Nations people out on the land. A young Na-Cho Nyak Dun woman and NND employee remembered CPAWS contacting NND because "they wanted youth involved with the Peel; up until that point it had been only Elders" (First Nations Interview #3). Over the course of the campaign, NND members of all ages who had never been to the Peel Watershed were able to use funding provided by CPAWS and other sources to visit the watershed. As this participant believed, this not only motivated people to participate in conservation and decision-making in the Peel, but inspired them to give other First Nations people an opportunity to experience the watershed firsthand.

The publicity generated by the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement also brought national and international media attention to the Peel Watershed, which enabled some First Nations peoples to travel into the watershed. *60 Minutes*, *National Geographic*, and a Miami news outlet called *Fusion* all featured stories on the Peel Watershed, flying community members into the Peel Watershed for interviews (Fusion, 2014; National Geographic, 2014; First Nations Interview #3). Famed environmentalist, David Suzuki, traveled to the Peel Watershed and spoke about the watershed's value at the Na-Cho Nyak Dun government office (First Nations Interview #3; Vimeo, 2017). Discussing this extensive media coverage and whether or not it was a good thing with a young NND employee one afternoon led her to answer, somewhat jokingly, "Yeah. We're hoping to get Leonardo DiCaprio" (First

Nations Interview #3). International media attention to the Peel Watershed in some ways reflects an approach that First Nations want to avoid: the construction of the Peel issue as a polarizing debate between protection and development. But this extensive coverage has also benefited First Nations by bringing local issues to international attention, by providing people in small Yukon communities with a chance to visit the Peel Watershed, and by enabling some First Nations peoples to become involved with conservation groups as well as their own governments.

As discussed in chapter 3, Elders have used the Peel Watershed planning process and the Peel legal proceedings to reconnect to the land, traditional practices, and each other. For younger people, the Peel campaign has presented a chance to envision a future that exists for them and their community outside of the mining industry. As one TH employee believed, First Nations should be looking to long-term, sustainable economic options such as tourism for alternatives to mining, not only to avoid the detrimental environmental impacts that mining often leaves upon the land, but also to avoid the social challenges that the mining industry tends to bring to small communities (First Nations Interview #11). As he articulated,

> What do tourists really come up here to see? It's not mines. It's culture, its wilderness, it's an intact environment, traditional activities ... And if we don't have an environment that supports those types of things, there is no economy, there is no opportunities (First Nations Interview #11).

In this way, the social and economic needs of First Nations are inseparable from conservation. Without one, the other cannot exist. And if CPAWS' most recent investment into public engagement in the Peel Watershed is any indication, Yukon conservation groups have learned that the needs of the community must fit into any environmental campaign.

In the summer of 2015, CPAWS orchestrated a First Nations youth trip down the Wind and Peel Rivers, covering all the costs and asking only that individuals present their experiences to their

communities following the trip (First Nations Interview #4). According to one participant, who now leads *Youth for the Peel*, the 2015 trip "really sparked a fire in each one of us that we are not satisfied and we're not going to stand aside while this happens" (Ibid). This resulted in developing a trip to be led by First Nations youth for First Nations youth, using funding provided by CPAWS (Ibid). *Youth for the Peel*, which celebrated its inaugural year in the summer of 2016, has goals of developing a tourism business and training First Nations youth to be river guides so that they, and their communities, can benefit economically from the watershed's booming tourism industry (Ibid). But the trip is also about education and reconnecting people to the land, rivers, history, and culture of the watershed. As this leader stated,

> By bringing youth out there [we facilitate] this process of thinking about our agreements, thinking about our history, thinking about our futures. While they're there in the affected area, those intricacies will be connected with the infinite of the heart. It's going to create that full circle in them and that's when they become of their own accord. They'll become ambassadors; ambassadors of the region, ambassadors of cultural revitalization, and empowered in the direction that they want to go (First Nations Interview #4).

Decolonization in Yukon Territory means ending the relationship of dominance and dependence between settlers and First Nations peoples. It means, following self-governing agreements, building capacity for First Nations governments and allowing and supporting First Nations to progress in ways that the community supports. And it means reconnecting to territory, knowledge, and cultural practices that have been lost or diminished by the ongoing effects of colonization. In this way, it seems that conservation in the Peel Watershed has begun to plant the seeds for a reconciled relationship between conservation and First Nations to emerge. By enabling the transition of the *Youth for the Peel* trip into something that is controlled by First Nations for the benefit of First Nations youth, CPAWS has achieved what so many elders speak about in their hopes for the future: educating young people through direct experience on the land.

First Nations interview participants spoke to the value of the relationship between First Nations and conservation groups in ways that echoed the feeling expressed by members of conservation groups. As one TH employee stated,

> I think it's a good relationship. They bring different things to the table, right. CPAWS brings the resources and TH and NND bring, like, the importance of it because they live there and have been there. They can tell you stories of hundreds of years ago when our grandparents were there (First Nations Interview #6).

While for a Vuntut Gwitchin employee, commenting on the involvement of CPAWS in both the *Youth for the Peel* trip and the Peel Watershed overall,

> It's been paramount. It's absolutely paramount ... A group like CPAWS is a very interesting, you know. They are kind of like, I guess, some kind of sleeper cell. They come to action right at the right point and I'm continually blown back by the foresight with a group like CPAWS (First Nations Interview #4).

For many, the success of the Peel campaign lies in the ability of conservation groups to transfer a level of power to local First Nations governments and peoples. As one former CPAWS director stated, CPAWS, over the course of the campaign, "did have a pretty pivotal role in educating not only the public but working with communities to enable them to come to their own conclusions about protecting the Peel on their terms" (CPAWS Interview #2). By engaging with First Nations, conservation groups let go of a degree of control over the Peel campaign, allowing First Nations to connect to the watershed, articulate those connections, and participate in conservation efforts in ways that reflected their own visions for the future of the region. And while conservation groups do indeed have important things to bring to the table, such as their knowledge and experience in conservation, science, and public relations, as well as their own diverse connections to the watershed, it is ultimately First Nations peoples who know the Peel Watershed and thus, it is First Nations who must be directly involved in its future.

A new conservation paradigm?

Critical scholarship calls for a paradigm shift in environmental conservation that not only acknowledges the presence of Indigenous peoples but includes them as active agents in environmental decision making (Ross et al., 2011; Paulson et al., 2012; Stevens, 2014). As Stevens (2014) states, this new paradigm

> maintains that biodiversity conservation can be advanced by recognizing, respecting, and supporting Indigenous peoples' conservation achievements and initiatives and by working together with them in ways that respect their ownership of their territory, their sovereignty, and their rights and responsibilities (p. 7).

As conservation groups in Canada, from CPAWS to Greenpeace to the David Suzuki Foundation, acknowledge, this paradigm shift is essential for the future of Canada, for the environment here and around the world, and to achieve reconciliation between First Nations peoples and settlers. Yet the surprisingly few successful examples of conservation groups and First Nations working together, towards mutually beneficial goals, presents questions about the arrival of this new paradigm.

As Indigenous peoples have long acknowledged, conservation can never be about just conservation. This is exhibited across Canada in the ways that contemporary environmental movements quickly become inseparable from unresolved land claims, uneven access to land and resources, and racist and essentialist constructions of Indigenous peoples and cultures. In Yukon Territory, this is illustrated in the ways that First Nations, using their Final Agreements, challenge colonial conservation values and decision making processes that exclude them. By drawing upon their Final Agreements, as well as personal and culture connections to the Peel Watershed, First Nations have both participated in the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement, the land use planning process, and the Peel legal proceedings, and succeeded in elevating the Peel Watershed above the classic and dualistic environmental conflict that poses environmentalists against industry. Conservation groups have

recognized that working with self-governing First Nations in the Peel Watershed presents an opportunity to not only bring about a new era of conservation in the territory, but a new era of democratic and participatory decision making.

Interview participants representing both First Nations and conservation groups spoke in similar ways about the goals of the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement: upholding the integrity of the Final Agreements, ensuring that the 'wilderness', biodiversity, and the land and water remain intact, protecting First Nations culture and traditional practices while promoting education and revitalization of that culture, and conveying the importance of the Peel Watershed as a relatively intact ecosystem, both for the species that live there and for the continuation of First Nations culture. These goals amount to a desire to protect the Peel Watershed from industrial development, and more specifically, to protect the 80% decided upon by the Peel Watershed Planning Commission in 2011. But for interview participants, while protection became the ultimate aim, equally important has been the success of the Peel campaign in bringing people together. For many, this represents the future of all decision-making in Yukon Territory and across Canada.

The relationship between First Nations and conservation groups, like the relationship between First Nations peoples and settlers, comes out of years of colonization, the impacts of which are still felt in communities around Yukon Territory. The ways that the territorial and federal governments, conservation groups, and mining companies now work with Yukon First Nations is very much a recent and unfolding development, and one that most note has plenty of room for improvement. Yet most spoke positively about the relationship between First Nations and non-First Nations peoples across the territory. As one interview participant stated,

> Really, practically speaking, functionally speaking, [First Nations] have equal say now; they have governing power; they can speak with non-Indigenous peoples on a government to government basis. That reflects, I think, expanding consciousness (Activist/Artist Interview #1).

For many, the settlement of First Nations Final Agreements reflects a recognition that all Yukoners must work together to deal with the legacies of colonialism and create a brighter future for all who call Yukon home. As one interview participant noted,

> These Final Agreements transformed Yukon society and empowered individuals in the Yukon in a way that is a truly unlike anywhere else in Canada. It also set up some processes, for example, like land use planning, environmental assessment, you know, development assessment. It's light-years ahead of anywhere else. (YCS Interview #2)

This participant went on to state that he believes that

> It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the First Nations Final Agreements to the social makeup of the Yukon … [What] I don't think anybody expected was how drastically it would transform the society of the Yukon for everybody, both First Nation and non-First Nations (YCS Interview #2).

According to some, it is not just conservation groups that are getting on board with a new kind of decision-making in Yukon Territory. Thanks in large part to the Final Agreements, mining companies and Yukon Government are also realizing that they can no longer proceed without the support of First Nations, and that it is their best interest to develop relationships with First Nations that are built around mutual need and respect (Artist/Activist Interview #2). Strengthening relationships by sharing different perspectives, one interview participant believed, present exciting possibilities for the territory:

> [T]here's shared values and everyone's coming from their own place, as well. And that's cool, too. It's really neat to listen to where people come from and why. Where are you coming from in here (the heart)? I'd like to hear about that. And maybe I can expand my own heartfelt understanding of something through hearing your path, you know. It's exciting (Activist/Artist Interview #1).

While for the First Nations leader heading the *Youth for the Peel*, the opportunity for Yukon to set an example for the rest of Canada was all about bringing people together, First Nations and non-First Nations:

> We can't afford division anymore. In fact, I see much more strength in bringing both of these worlds together and finding that middle ground, by bringing all the people together. Because at

> the end of the day that's what we are, people. And at the end of the day it's ignorance that we're battling; ignorance from racism, ignorance from whatever any of these ism's (First Nations Interview #4).

Thanks to First Nations Final Agreements and the lessons learned by conservation groups in the Peel Watershed, a new era of conservation that promotes working together, finding connections, and making decisions with the needs, perspectives, and values of all in mind has found its way into parks, protected areas, and the management of species and habitats throughout Yukon Territory. Parks and protected areas in Yukon Territory are now created from First Nations Final Agreements, complete with hunting and harvesting rights and varying levels of co-management. That is, First Nations work with Yukon Government at the time of outlining their Final Agreements to determine where potential protected areas should be and what types of land-uses should exist there (First Nations Interview #1). Speaking of Tombstone Territorial Park, which came out of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Final Agreement (and part of which lies in the Peel Watershed), one TH employee stated,

> No one in the Tr'ondëk community or probably the whole of Yukon, at least Dawson, even thinks of Tombstone as a park, because parks, for many of us, are things … it's like a museum piece; it's like taking a chunk of land and putting it under glass, which is kind of the sure-fire way to kill it. Like, nothing has changed there; there's absolutely no difference about the park other than some things related to the type of industrial activities that can and can't happen there (First Nations Interview #9).

Other parks, like the recently created Kusawa Territorial Park, coming out of two First Nations Final Agreements in southern Yukon, also challenge 'the old paradigm' of conservation by negotiating protected areas with a multitude of interests in mind, acknowledging both human use upon the land and the importance of local management (Government of Yukon, 2015). Parks such as Tombstone and Kusawa Territorial Parks, and Ivvavik and Vuntut National Parks, are created by and for First Nations. Because of this, they reflect First Nations values, which do not see the land as something that can be split in an either/or fashion (protection or development, park or industry, First Nations settlement land or Yukon Government land). These parks and the model that created them redefine conservation in

Yukon Territory by acknowledging that the land must be considered and managed from the perspectives of adaptability and multiple uses, not from a model that objectifies the land and creates boundaries that do not reflect local connections to it.

First Nations have also been able to use the desire among non-First Nations peoples to keep industrial development out of particular landscapes, such as the rugged Tombstone Mountains, to increase their own settlement lands:

> Using a park as a mechanism to expand, essentially, the amount of settlement land that TH could get is what [Tombstone Park] really is, right, because otherwise that whole park would have been settlement land. But then it's like, 'hey we can make it a park'. Then it's like, 'we can take this, this *and* this'. And it's like, TH would never have made a park out of their home. But if some other government says you can put a park boundary around it and someone won't be able to mine in it, sounds good (First Nations Interview #9).

First Nations are now central actors in the creation and management of parks and protected areas in Yukon Territory. And while the model is not perfect and disagreements undoubtedly arise, it has moved a long way from the conservation model that created Kluane National Park and Reserve by expelling Kluane First Nations peoples from their traditional territory so that Euro-Canadian values of wilderness and wildlife management could be inserted, upheld, and enforced (Neufeld, 2011). In fact, when Parks Canada wanted to create a park in southern Yukon near the community of Teslin in recent years without bothering to tell First Nations about their plans, one interview participant remembered, "there was such opposition to it they just said 'pfff' and they left" (YCS Interview #2).

Full and ongoing First Nations participation in natural resource management, land use planning, and the creation and management of parks and protected areas, along with the incorporation of traditional knowledge into such decision making processes, continue to illustrate some of the challenges faced by Yukon First Nations (First Nations Interview #9, #10). Environmental conservation in Yukon Territory is inevitably wrapped up in these challenges and must continue to work with, and for, First

Nations to continue to improve this relationship. But despite these ongoing challenges, the ability of Yukon conservation groups to engage with Yukon First Nations throughout the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement does present important lessons for environmental conservation in the rest of Canada.

While conservation in other parts of Canada continues to exhibit many of the problematic elements of colonial conservation that exclude First Nations from decision making processes and restrict access to, and practices in, traditional territories (MacLaren, 2011; Youdelis, 2016), conservation groups, and conservation generally, in Yukon Territory have learned valuable lessons in the Peel Watershed. The challenges still faced in Yukon Territory indicate that a new conservation paradigm has not yet fully arrived and pose interesting questions as to what it might look like. But the enthusiasm expressed by members of conservation groups and First Nations about the collaboration of the two groups throughout the Peel campaign, and the optimism about the future of this relationship, suggest that conservation in Yukon Territory will continue to strengthen its relationship with Yukon First Nations and, perhaps, bring a new conservation paradigm to realization.

Conclusion

The history of wildlife managers, wilderness enthusiasts, and conservation groups imposing their values upon local, primarily Indigenous, populations across Canada has been long and, for local peoples, painful. Negative associations among Indigenous populations towards conservation are rooted in decades of conservation practices that occurred within a colonial framework. Racist and essentializing assumptions of Indigenous peoples as poor stewards of the land for the ways that their traditional practices conflicted with Euro-Canadian understandings of and practices upon the land resulted in

conservation policies that alienated Indigenous peoples from their land, traditional practices, and decision-making power.

In Yukon Territory, colonial conceptions of nature and conservation relied upon common Euro-Canadian environmental narratives of wilderness protection and wildlife management to create bounded and un-peopled protected areas and assert control over the land and people that had called Yukon home for thousands of years. Only with First Nations land claims, beginning in the 1960s and culminating in the signing of individual First Nations Final Agreements, was this conservation model challenged. In recent years, conservation in Yukon Territory has undergone a dramatic shift. Drawing upon their Final Agreements, First Nations are now actors in natural resource management, in establishing and managing protected areas, and in land-use planning processes. Though important scholarship has pointed to the challenges faced by Yukon First Nations in fully participating in these processes (Nadasdy, 1999, 2003; Natcher & Davis, 2007), it is generally agreed that the 'capacity' of Yukon First Nations is increasing as First Nations gain more experience operating as self-governing bodies (First Nations Interview #4, #9, #10; YCS Interview #2).

The Peel Watershed represents perhaps the most striking example of the transition from the old conservation paradigm to the new. Environmentalists and conservation groups began to campaign for protection of parts of the Peel Watershed using many of the narratives characteristic of conservation in the second half of the twentieth century, such as wilderness protection and the maintenance of an 'intact' and 'un-peopled' landscape. But through engagement with First Nations, conservation groups in the Peel Watershed worked to construct a conservation movement that spoke to First Nations' values as well as those of environmentalists. In this way, the Peel Watershed became known as a 'wilderness' that was also a traditional homeland. Conservation groups used their resources – such as their ability to reach a nation-wide audience and generate awareness and funding for the campaign – to support First

Nations, for whom resources – funding and 'capacity', largely a result of limited staff and resources – needed to be spread over a wide range of needs, not just conservation and land use planning. In turn, First Nations' knowledge, histories, and ongoing traditional practices in the Peel Watershed proved invaluable for an environmental campaign that, at the outset, ran the risk of imposing external conservation values upon local First Nations. By enabling First Nations people to physically reconnect to the Peel Watershed through a series of river trips, conservation groups not only built up education and awareness around the Peel Watershed but supported First Nations in their goals of cultural revitalization through a reconnection to the land, traditional practices, and each other. As illustrated in chapter 3, this has supported First Nations re-territorialization of the Peel Watershed.

A new conservation paradigm is called for in environmental conservation. This new paradigm envisions environmental conservation working with First Nations towards goals that protect biodiversity and ecosystems, restore environmentally impacted areas, and mediate the impacts of climate change, while at the same time reconnecting First Nations to land and culture and restoring severed relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Some view this new era of conservation as a path to reconciliation, yet few successful examples can be identified. The relationship between Indigenous peoples and conservation groups continues to be challenged by the ongoing legacies of colonization, the struggles of Indigenous peoples for political and economic autonomy, and the embedded values of conservationists, whom often construct 'the environment' in ways that conflict with Indigenous understandings. And while these challenges undoubtedly find their way into the Peel Watershed, the conservation movement to 'Protect the Peel' has, over more than two decades, ignited a movement towards this new conservation paradigm. As this chapter, and this thesis, has shown, the efforts of Yukon conservation groups to engage and empower First Nations in the Peel Watershed, while continually building this relationship throughout the Peel campaign, suggest that this relationship will continue to positively shape environmental conservation and environmental decision making in Yukon

Territory in years to come. And as both environmental conservation and the relationship between First Nations and non-First Nations peoples continues to evolve in Yukon Territory, the rest of Canada will certainly benefit from following its lead.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

For decades, environmental conservation has been imposed upon Indigenous and local peoples, both across Canada and around the world. Conservation has been deployed to protect species, habitats, and landscapes constructed as wilderness. Following the Yellowstone, or fortress, model of conservation, parks and protected areas emerged as the outcome of constructions of 'nature' and 'wilderness' as a recreational space, a sublime escape from modernity, a frontier, or a pristine ecosystem, all of which constructed 'nature' as separate from 'culture'. As scholars and local peoples emphasize, these constructions ignored and erased the long and complex relationships that local peoples had with their environments and reconstructed the homelands and traditional territory of Indigenous populations from the perspective of outsiders (Cronon, 1996; Spence, 1999; Nadasdy, 1999; 2003; 2005s; Loo, 2001; Neumann, 2001; Sandlos, 2003, 2014; Binnema & Niemi, 2006; Stevens, 2014).

In Canada, conservation has served as one of the many tools of colonization, disconnecting Indigenous peoples from lands, traditional practices, spiritual places, trade networks, and the knowledge derived from these embedded connections. Regulation of Indigenous peoples, land, and traditional practices followed Canadian policies of assimilation laid out in the *Indian Act* and enforced by federal agents, scientists, surveyors, missionaries, and researchers (Neufeld, 2011; Martin, 2011; Monchalin, 2016). And these regulatory policies grew alongside Euro-Canadian visions of modernity characterized by increasingly bureaucratic and hierarchical governing structures that disempowered local peoples by relying on the knowledge and 'expertise' of professionals (Nadasdy, 1999; Loo, 2001; Neufeld, 2011).

As important critical scholarship has noted, the environmental conservation model that evolved within the high-modernist framework constructed 'nature' as external, a scientific object to be controlled, protected, and managed through scientific study and rational planning (Cronon, 1996; Scott, 1999, Braun, 2002; Neufeld, 2011). The nature-culture dichotomy, which emerged during the scientific revolution and the enlightenment, has since been imposed on cultures around the world, many of whom understand the world in vastly different ways (Latour, 1993; Berkes, 1999; Nadasdy, 1999; Castree & Braun, 2001; Monchalin, 2016). Indigenous traditional knowledge, though highly diverse, is largely characterized as embedded in and attached to local culture, adaptive, and based on respect and reciprocity (Berkes, 1999; Roberts, 2012; Johnson, 2012). The ways that the knowledge and ontologies of Indigenous peoples in Canada have been challenged by the dualistic, linear, reductionist, and instrumental knowledge of scientific modernism reflect settler-colonial relationships around the world.

The concept of wilderness arises out of dualistic understandings of the human relationship to 'nature' (Callicott, 1991; Cronon, 1996; Braun, 2002). As environmental historians have noted, 'wilderness' appeared in Biblical literature, as a dangerous place outside of human society; these conceptions turned to religious celebrations in the nineteenth century, as wilderness became increasingly celebrated as a romantic and sublime escape from the urban squalor of the industrial revolution (Callicott, 1991; Merchant, 1995; Cronon, 1996; Lippai, 2014). The ways that the concept of wilderness has constructed landscapes long occupied, used, and transformed by Indigenous populations as 'pristine' or 'empty' has been importantly noted and critiqued by both scholars and local peoples. Parks and protected areas in Canada, the United States, and around the world emerged, beginning in the late-nineteenth century, from efforts to protect landscapes constructed as wilderness. In recent years, the concept has been increasingly called into question, both for the ways that it is rooted in, and perpetuates, the problematic dichotomy of nature and culture and for its exclusion of Indigenous presence (Callicott, 1991; Cronon, 1996; Spence, 1999; Neumann, 2001; Binnema & Niemi, 2006;

Sandlos, 2008, 2014). Yet the concept of wilderness continues, both in environmental conservation movements and in public conceptions of relatively undeveloped landscapes.

In Yukon Territory and the Peel Watershed, problematic conservation efforts and the concept of wilderness have been imposed by both state and non-state actors on local First Nations populations (Nadasdy, 2003; Cruikshank, 2005; Neufeld, 2011; Martin, 2011). Many of the assimilatory conservation practices that characterized colonialism across Canada can also be seen in Yukon Territory, including the removal of local populations from traditional territories, the regulation of peoples and their livelihoods, and the intentional separation of peoples from one another and the land (Peepre & Locke, 2008; Neufeld, 2011; Nadasdy, 2012). As a result, many Yukon First Nations peoples have developed an unsurprising opposition to environmental conservation, the concept of wilderness, parks and protected areas, and natural resource management (Nadasdy, 2003, 2005a; Cruikshank, 2005; Martin, 2011).

Conservation efforts to protect the Peel Watershed from industrial development emerged in the early 1990s around opposition to mining along the Bonnet Plume River (CPAWS Interview #2; Tourism Interview #5). The conservation movement, which over two decades evolved into the *Three Rivers* campaign and, later, the 'Protect the Peel' campaign, quickly encountered local First Nations peoples, many of whom expressed suspicion and opposition to the model of conservation brought by conservation groups (CPAWS Interview #2). Over time, First Nations and conservation groups aligned to create a mutually beneficial relationship in their opposition to opening up any part of the 67,431 square-kilometer Peel Watershed to mining, oil, and gas exploration and development. This relationship, though imperfect, strategic, and sometimes contentious, presents important steps for environmental conservation in reaching a reconciled relationship with Indigenous peoples.

The ways that legacies of colonialism, the concept of wilderness, and First Nations self-governance shape conservation, environmental decision making, and First Nations cultural revitalization

in the Peel Watershed illustrate why examination of this conservation movement offers important insight for conservation in other parts of Canada. The relationship between First Nations and environmental conservation is tested in the Peel Watershed, and as the conservation movement demonstrates, a new conservation paradigm that wishes to include Indigenous peoples must live up to its vision by working with Indigenous governments, peoples, and politics.

My research examines the engagement of environmental conservation with First Nations through an exploration of the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement in Yukon Territory's Peel Watershed. In the Peel Watershed, the complex and devastating legacies of colonialism shape contemporary First Nations governments, land use planning and environmental decision making, and First Nations efforts to reconnect to, and revitalize, traditional knowledge, language, and culture. Through the Peel campaign, conservation groups attempted to transcend the historically contentious relationship between conservation and Indigenous peoples by incorporating First Nations peoples and concerns into conservation. Taken for granted concepts such as 'nature', 'the environment', 'resources', and 'wilderness' were called into question, as diverse peoples, visions, and ontologies came together. Furthermore, the concept of wilderness was re-examined, reconsidered, and rearticulated, as the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement worked to fit the wide range of experiences, perspectives, and understandings of Yukoners and Canadians into its environmental campaign.

Colonialism drastically altered First Nations lives, livelihoods, and connections to the Peel Watershed beginning in the mid-nineteenth century (Peepre & Locke, 2008). The arrival of traders, missionaries, settlers, epidemics, religion, the Canadian state, and new economies all re-territorialized the Peel Watershed by intentionally and unintentionally challenging and severing First Nations connections to the Peel. Over time, this re-territorialization was characterized by an increasing move away from the land and traditional activities and towards central communities and wage-based

economies (Peepre & Locke, 2008). This shift has resulted in the Peel Watershed being imagined by many non-First Nations peoples as a mining frontier and an empty wilderness, which both challenged First Nations' deep connections to the watershed and initiated a process by which the Peel was increasingly traveled on, and shaped, by outsiders. In recent years, following First Nations self-government, First Nations have begun to reconnect to the Peel Watershed by physically reconnecting to the land, revitalizing language and cultural practices, and reigniting severed relationships between peoples who were separated by land claims and other colonial processes (First Nations Interview #4, #9). This First Nations reconnection has begun a new process of territorialization in the Peel Watershed.

The ways that colonial processes of territorialization disconnected people from the Peel Watershed allowed it to emerge as a landscape many know as a wilderness. Like other remote, un-roaded, and relatively undeveloped landscapes, both tourism and environmental conservation have drawn upon familiar environmental narratives in their efforts to protect the Peel Watershed as the 'wilderness' that it is believed to be. But the political autonomy and strong cultural ties of First Nations in the Peel Watershed challenged conceptions of wilderness that constructed the Peel Watershed as 'pristine' and 'empty'. As a result, the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement was forced to reconsider its understandings of wilderness and develop a campaign that both relied on environmental narratives that value so-called wilderness for its lack of development, its landscape connectivity, and its lack of human occupancy, and acknowledged the historical and ongoing use, occupancy, and environmental transformation of First Nations in the Peel. Although problematic and colonial conceptions of empty wilderness continue in the Peel Watershed, First Nations assertions that the watershed is a traditional homeland has resulted in a re-imagined idea of wilderness in Yukon Territory. The concept of wilderness continues to be used in the Peel Watershed, as conservation groups work to move beyond racist and problematic elements of the concept while holding on to those that align with

First Nations worldviews, speak to landscape connectivity and species diversity, and draw upon the emotional and spiritual experiences of First Nations and non-First Nations peoples.

A reconsideration of the concept of wilderness and its value for environmental conservation comes with a reconsideration of conservation values and a recognition that environmental conservation has long served as a tool of colonization. The relationship between conservation groups and First Nations in the Peel Watershed illustrates both the challenges and opportunities of moving beyond a colonial conservation model. First Nations in the Peel Watershed were suspicious of, and uncomfortable with, conservation groups that attempted to construct a conservation movement in their homeland without their participation (CPAWS Interview #2, #3). But conservation groups' recognition that conservation in the Peel Watershed could not occur without self-governing First Nations, and that it was in the best interest of all Yukoners to develop a mutually beneficial relationship with local peoples, has illustrated some of the ways that conservation might reconcile its historically contentious relationship with Indigenous peoples.

Environmental conservation in Canada is increasingly aligning with Indigenous and local peoples (Davis, 2011; Skura, 2015). Conservation groups provide a much needed source of funding, research, and publicity to small communities, who often lack the political power and/or the human and financial capacity to pursue action on their own. Indigenous support offers conservation campaigns local and embedded knowledge, connections to, and understandings of, place, and, in some cases, legal title to the land in question. Moreover, conservation groups' engagement with Indigenous peoples enables conservation to expand beyond mere environmental protection and incorporate Indigenous concerns about land claims, participation in decision making processes, and the continuation of, or reconnection to, traditional practices. This engagement opens up opportunities for reconciliation between Indigenous

and non-Indigenous peoples and offers important reminders about the ways that colonialism and its legacies continue to impact Indigenous peoples across Canada.

This research hopes to contribute to the way that environmental conservation movements across Canada engage with Indigenous populations, concerns, and politics by creating mutually beneficial and lasting relationships. Yukon First Nations are self-governing, giving them a level of political autonomy largely unknown to Indigenous populations across Canada (Slowey, 2015). As a result, conservation groups in Yukon Territory were forced to engage with First Nations in the Peel Watershed in a way that conservation movements in other parts of Canada should, but are not necessarily required to. The lessons learned through this engagement reveal important lessons for conservation across Canada, as well as for First Nations with recently settled land claims.

The struggles experienced by First Nations in the Peel Watershed, illustrated in the various interpretations of Final Agreements, the level of meaningful participation in decision making processes, and the general feeling that political inequities continue to reflect colonial power relations, all represent some of the challenges that First Nations and Indigenous populations with recently settled land claims across Canada will face or are facing. Though celebrations of the increasing number of land claims agreements in Canada are rightfully deserved, ongoing challenges for these newly autonomous First Nations should not be ignored. As the Peel Watershed illustrates, First Nations governments must continue to enforce their agreements, educate other governments and the public about these agreements, and do so with a human and financial capacity below that which is required (First Nations Interview #9, #10). For many Indigenous populations, self-government does not signal the end of colonialism but merely the beginning of a new set of challenges (Dacks, 2004; Natcher & Davis, 2007; Coulthard, 2014). The challenges faced by self-governing Yukon First Nations more than twenty years

after the signing of their land claims agreements will be the challenges facing newly self-governing Indigenous nations across Canada, if they are not already.

As the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement illustrates, environmental conservation can no longer distance itself from the complex politics in which contemporary Indigenous peoples and nations are entangled. Conservation cannot continue to fall back on the problematic approach that constructs the environment as disconnected from local peoples and their economies. And conservation cannot continue to exert power over local peoples, whether through knowledge production, policy implementation, or in the narratives it privileges. Instead, this power must be transferred to Indigenous peoples and local populations.

As Canada and Canadians work towards reconciling relations with Indigenous peoples, the challenge for environmental conservation and conservation groups moving forward lies in inserting themselves into these highly political debates. Conservation can no longer exist outside of conversations around land claims, access to land and resources, decolonization, and reconciliation. Conservation must align with, and continue to support, Indigenous populations in their pursuit of land claims and in the upholding of land claims agreements. Ultimately, it is Indigenous lands that continue to be subject to poor and harmful industrial practices, and Indigenous populations that continue to be exploited by industry, lied to by the government, and forced to enter expensive, drawn out, and unnecessary legal battles (Saul, 2014; Coultard, 2014; Monchalin, 2016; Youdelis, 2016). Conservation must acknowledge this and work to support Indigenous peoples in their legal, political, social, cultural, and economic efforts to change this course.

Conservation groups in Yukon Territory were, in the Peel Watershed campaign, forced into these difficult conversations by the recent settlement of land claims and by First Nations Final Agreements. Conservation values were questioned, while long standing animosities and colonial legacies were

brought to light. Not all conservation movements in Canada are forced into these conversations. But when they are not, they must force themselves into them. And once there, conservation must allow space for Indigenous peoples to articulate their own knowledge and connections to the land, to work through the complex challenges left by colonialism, and to determine a future for their land that supports their communities, their economies, and their values. Conservation in Canada can no longer assert its values over Indigenous populations but must work with Indigenous peoples to reach new values. This is the reality of the new conservation paradigm. This is the reality of conservation as reconciliation. And this reality makes environmental conservation about a lot more than just protecting lands, species, and habitats.

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Appendix A: Sample Interview Questions

Tourism Operators

Can you tell me who you are and what you do in the Yukon?

Where in the territory do you operate?

Who is your clientele? Where do they come for?

What is your relationship to the Peel Watershed?

What do you think about the Peel Planning Process?

Have you traveled to the Peel? If so, what was your experience? If not, why? Do you plan to?

What do you think the role of the Peel River Watershed plays in the Yukon? In Canada?

What role does tourism play in the Yukon?

What role does mining play in the Yukon?

How would you compare the Peel to other regions in the Yukon? Kluane? Tombstone/Dempster? North?

How do you see the future of the Peel Watershed? Of the Yukon?

Do you think adventure tourism will play a bigger role in coming years?

What do you think of the Peel Watershed as a wilderness area?

Do you think wilderness and economic development can coexist?

What about wilderness and First Nations traditional culture?

Employees of the Yukon Government

Can you tell me who you are and what you do in the Yukon?

What does your job entail?

How long have you been in this position?

What did you do before?

What is your relationship to the Peel Watershed and the Planning Process?

Was the planning process fair/accurate? Does it represent your hopes for how planning and development should occur in the Yukon?

Have you traveled to the Peel? If so, what was your experience? If not, why? Do you plan to?

What do you think the role of the Peel River Watershed plays in the Yukon? In Canada?

What role does tourism play in the Yukon?

What role does mining play in the Yukon?

How would you compare the Peel to other regions in the Yukon? Kluane? Tombstone/Dempster? North?

How do you see the future of the Peel Watershed? Of the Yukon?

What do you think about the way that the Yukon is depicted as wilderness? What about the Peel?

Do you think wilderness and economic development can coexist?

What about wilderness and First Nations traditional culture?

What about First Nations traditional culture and mining in the Peel Watershed?

How do you think that the Yukon/the Peel Watershed will change in coming years?

<u>Employees/Directors of Conservation Organizations</u>

Can you tell me who you are and what you do in the Yukon?

What is your job at _____? What does it entail?

Can you tell me a bit about environmental conservation in the Yukon?

Do you engage at all with conservation outside the Yukon?

What is your relationship to the Peel Watershed?

What do you think about the Peel Planning Process?

Can you tell me about the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement?

Have you traveled to the Peel? If so, what was your experience? If not, why? Do you plan to?

What is your relationship to First Nations in the Yukon? In the Peel?

How has conservation worked with First Nations in the Peel Watershed/the campaign?

What do you think the role of the Peel River Watershed plays in the Yukon? In Canada?

What role does tourism play in the Yukon?

What role does mining play in the Yukon?

How would you compare the Peel to other regions in the Yukon? Kluane? Tombstone/Dempster? North?

What do you think of the Peel Watershed as a wilderness area?

Who do you consider to be the primary users of the Peel River Watershed at this time? Should this change? Will this change following the final land-use plan?

What do you think about the Peel Watershed as a biologically diverse region? Does the Yukon have any obligation to protect such biodiversity?

Do you think wilderness and economic development can coexist?

What about wilderness and First Nations traditional culture?

How do you see the future of the Peel Watershed? Of the Yukon?

<u>First Nations peoples and employees</u>

Who are you? Where do you live? How long have you lived there?

Have you traveled to the Peel Watershed? How often? What do you do there?

If not, why not? Do you plan to?

Did you participate in the Peel land use planning process? Why/why not?

Was traditional knowledge included in the planning process?

What do you think about the 'Protect the Peel' conservation movement? Have you been involved?

Do you have a relationship with CPAWS or other conservation groups? If so, what does it look like? If not, how come?

How do you feel about the relationship between conservation groups and First Nations in the Peel?

Is the Peel Watershed a wilderness? Why/why not?

How do non-First Nations people understand the Peel Watershed differently than First Nations people?

Do you think that First Nations are adequately represented in tourism? In environmental conservation? In land-use planning? In government?

Do you wish to see the Peel protected? Do you think there should be mining in the Peel?

How do you see the future in the Yukon Territory?